

CLEAN REGENCY ROMANCE

A Duke's Daughters –
THE ELBURY BOUQUET

Book 7 – Iris

The background of the cover features a romantic scene between a man and a woman in Regency-era clothing. The woman, with blonde hair in a bun, wears a dark dress with a large, ornate purple and pink floral bodice. The man, in a dark suit and red cravat, leans in to kiss her cheek. In the background, a dark piano sits on a patterned carpet in front of a window with green foliage outside. A vase of colorful flowers sits on the piano.

A MAIDEN FOR A
MARQUESS

ARIETTA RICHMOND

**A Duke's Daughters –
The Elbury Bouquet - Book 7 - Iris
Clean Regency Romance**

A Maiden for a Marquess

Arietta Richmond



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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, organisations, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously.

Dedication

For everyone who had the grace to be patient while this book, and every other book that I have written, was coming into existence, who provided cups of tea, and food, when the writing would not let me go, and endured countless times being asked for opinions.

For the readers who inspire me to continue writing, by buying my books! Especially for those of you who have taken the time to email me, or to leave reviews, and tell me what you love about my books, and what you'd like to see more of – thank you – I'm listening. I hope that you enjoy this new series (which features some appearances by old favourite characters from the His Majesty's Hounds series), just as much as my other books.

For my growing team of beta readers and advance reviewers – it's thanks to you that others can enjoy these books in the best presentation possible!

And for all the writers of Regency Historical Romance, whose books I read, who inspired me to write in this fascinating period.

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Prologue

Lady Iris Gardenbrook was enraptured.

There was no other word for it.

Oh, not by the singing, which was, even if one were to be polite about it, rather painful, but by the skill of the pianist who accompanied it. She ignored the singer, and focussed every part of her mind on the notes of the pianoforte, on the exquisite skill of the man who played.

A man she had never met before. Their hostess had made a passing comment about Lord Greenleigh having recently completed mourning, so it was reasonable that she had neither met him, nor really heard anything of him. But now... she desperately hoped that her brother knew him, and could provide an introduction.

She knew this piece, knew it well, and knew just how difficult it was to play well. Her eyes were locked to Lord Greenleigh – which was not a hardship, for he was a well-made man and more than passingly handsome – and the precise and elegant movements of his hands on the keys.

She had long despaired of ever meeting a gentleman who cared for music even half as much as she did, but now, hope flared within her. Surely, he could not have such skill unless he was truly passionate about music?

Beside her, her sister Violet was whispering with Lord Merryfield, but Iris ignored them, ignored everything. Slowly, inexorably, as the piece went on, his exquisite playing seduced her, and by the end of it, she knew that she was in love, that this was the man she wanted.

Which was beyond presumptuous of her, given that she had no idea what his title was, what his family were like, even whether he was already married. She knew it was foolish, but yet her heart cried out, and her soul declared that this was the man. Which meant that she would simply have to discover everything she could about him, and arrange an introduction at the earliest opportunity.

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Leon Atherton, Marquess of Greenleigh, wondered, for the thousandth time, if this was wise, even as he settled at the rather beautiful pianoforte in Lady Ormondston's parlour. There had been a flurry of whispers go around the room when it had been announced that he would play, and he knew that many of the *ton* would now consider it inappropriate for him to play in public, now that he bore the title.

Yet he could not have refused. Lady Ormondston was an old friend of his mother's, and his mother would not have forgiven him had he said no. He would not, by any action of his, add further unhappiness to his mother's life.

So, as he always did, he allowed the music to carry him away, to free him from the exigencies of life, and from the knowledge of the spectre that stalked his family, that placed him in an impossible position, every day. Let them whisper if they liked, he would not deny himself this one consolation – and perhaps some of those listening might even enjoy his performance – if they could manage to ignore the somewhat terrible singing of his hostess' daughter, that was.

As the piece drew to a close, he looked up, and allowed his eyes to actually take in the audience. They were quiet, and there was a moment of true silence as the last note died away, the silence of actual appreciation.

Then they offered polite applause.

He rose, turned to leave the performance area, and found his attention caught by a young woman who watched him intently. She

was seated beside another who looked quite like her – her sister, he suspected. His eyes met hers, and for a moment, it was as if no one else existed, so intense was her gaze. Her eyes were blue – the blue of the sky on a perfect summer day - and the errant thought came to him then that he was glad they were not green.

He wondered what she saw, why she regarded him so intently. Not that it mattered – he could not, ever, allow himself the luxury of a relationship – well, at least not for many years to come, not until after... He did not complete the thought. He gave the young woman the tiniest nod of acknowledgement, and forced himself to move, to leave the parlour. Perhaps a glass of punch would help him resist the temptation to wish for things he should not desire.

By the time the harpist had finished, and all of Lady Ormondston's guests joined him near the refreshment tables, he was more settled.

Until, across the crowded room, he saw her watching him. His heart ached – if only... but there was nothing he could do but allow time to solve his problem, and pray that it did so soon. For if it did not, if God was cruel, then he might never marry, never have the companionship of anyone, anything, except music.

He should not think like that, should not wish for that resolution, yet he did. It was unchristian to do so, and yet the thought would not leave him, ever.

He refilled his glass, and slipped out onto the terrace, even though the October air was cold – perhaps the chill would shock him back to his senses.

Chapter One

Iris had been hoping for this, from the moment that the pianoforte had been moved into the ballroom, as part of the preparations for her sister Violet's wedding. She stood quietly, hardly daring to breathe as she watched Lord Greenleigh cross the room, and settle onto the bench before the pianoforte. The small orchestra had taken a break from playing and the instruments all sat, waiting for their return.

She had not known if this would happen, but she had desperately prayed that it might, that the sight of their beautiful instrument would be enough to tempt him. It was nearly three months since she had first heard him play, had first seen him at Lady Ormondston's musicale, and in that three months, she had managed to achieve an introduction, dance with him once, and have precisely three conversations with him.

She remembered every second of each of those occasions in exquisite, frustrating detail.

When they had conversed, they had spoken only of music.

It was as if nothing else existed in his life – which did not, entirely, worry Iris, for if she had the choice almost nothing but music would exist in her life either. But it was unusual, and it made him all the more intriguing.

Even her mother seemed to know little of him, and her mother was close friends with most of the biggest gossips of the *ton*. That did not matter – what mattered was that he was unmarried, willing at least to occasionally talk to her, and he played a pianoforte with masterful

skill. She was determined, and stubborn, and capable of patience, much though her sisters and brother might have disputed that claim.

She hoped that she was right in believing that he at least liked her, for occasionally when they had spoken she had seen a warmth in his expression, which seemed to surpass that which might be expected from a mere acquaintance. But perhaps that was only wishful thinking on her part.

He began to play, and her heart flipped over in her chest. She knew this piece, knew it so well that she could play it without needing the sheet music, without needing to even see the keys – it was embedded in her soul as few other pieces of music were. And it was beautifully appropriate as a thing to play at her sister's wedding breakfast.

She moved, slowly and quietly, around the edge of the room, until she stood not all that far from where he played. He was lost in the music she could tell, his gaze unfocussed, seeing something no one else saw as his hands moved fluidly.

The idea came to her then, unbidden, carried on a desire so intense that it took her breath away completely for a moment.

Did she dare? Would he permit it if she tried?

Surely, here, in a room full of people, there could be no impropriety in it? Surely here, even if he thought there was, he would not reject it, for fear of even greater perceived impropriety?

As that thought slid through her mind, she almost laughed – of course there could be impropriety in it, but not so much as to be a scandal. She moved forward, knowing that she was going to do it, to take the risk.

She reached the edge of the narrow bench on which he sat, and he, somehow aware of her presence, glanced up. His eyes met hers, and something passed between them, something inexplicable, yet distinct. She reached out one hand, even as she bent slightly, as if to sit. He understood instantly, a flash of something compounded of alarm and delight crossing his eyes. For one moment, she thought that he would reject her, but then he swallowed, all the while never missing a note

as he played through the spiralling, complex piece, and edged across to one end of the bench.

She allowed her movement to complete, until she was sitting beside him, their thighs hard against each other, the scent of him intoxicating around her. Then, she closed her eyes for one moment, and allowed all of her awareness to sink into the music. Anchored in it, sure of her place, she opened her eyes again, and reached out, finding the space around his moving hands, and beginning to play – a second part to the melody, a complex, interwoven strand of the piece, echoing and supporting the main part that he played. As she did, he adjusted his own playing, leaving sections of the pattern which he would have played if playing alone for her to play instead.

It was the most wonderful moment of her life. She did not care what anyone said, what anyone thought – this was worth any price.

If she never had such a chance again, at least she would have this, a memory to hold close.

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Leon had considered not attending the wedding breakfast for Lady Violet Gardenbrook – at least in part because it meant that he was likely to see Lady Iris Gardenbrook. But also, as always, because he really had no interest in the social events of the *ton*. Despite his mother's hopes, he had no intention of marrying in the near future – he would not expose a young lady to the home life which he suffered for most of the year.

It was fortunate that his country estates were only a short distance from London, or coming away even for a few days at a time would have been impossible. Or perhaps, he thought wryly, that wasn't fortunate at all – if Greenleigh Park had been further away, then perhaps he might have avoided London altogether, when his presence was not absolutely required in the House of Lords.

But here he was, in a ballroom which currently contained the vast

majority of the *ton*, to celebrate the marriage of the daughter of a Duke he barely knew. The first thing that he had noticed, on entering that room, was the pianoforte – it was a magnificent instrument, even if the person playing it, as part of the small orchestra, was of barely adequate skill. It was beautifully made, and perfectly tuned – its mellow tones made his fingers ache to caress its keys.

Perhaps, later in the day, the chance might come for him to do so, and the gossips opinion of that be damned.

He allowed his mother to almost drag him about the room, she using the occasion to introduce him to any young woman she could find whom he had not already met. He smiled when required, and made sure that he appeared as dull and uninteresting as possible, so that none of them developed false hopes. Eventually, she tired of it, and with an irritated admonition to him that he should dance, went to speak with her own group of friends.

Which left him free to take advantage of the fact that the orchestra had just paused in their playing.

Casually, he wandered across the room, and settled onto the padded bench before it. His fingers traced its polished timber surface and the ivory of its keys, for a moment simply appreciating the craftsmanship of its construction, but then, unable to wait any longer, he began to play. The piece came to him instinctively – he knew it so well that it was ingrained in his soul – it was a piece that he played when he needed to be reminded of the beauty in the world, despite all troubles.

Soon, as it always did, the music consumed him, leaving him barely aware of the room around him, and washing away all of the frustrations which normally came with attending any social event. Time passed as he played, until the presence of a shadow beside him made him glance up.

Lady Iris Gardenbrook stood there, her blue eyes fixed upon him, full of an emotion which he had not expected, and did not entirely understand. His fingers continued, uninterrupted, while his mind processed what he saw. She understood – he knew that from their few

conversations about music – but what did she want, that she would disturb him now?

And then she shocked him to his core. She reached out a hand towards the keys, and moved slightly as if to sit.

She wanted to join him! This was a piece which could be played as a duet, with the melody splitting into two threads to interweave to make a whole – did she know it, that well? And could he take this risk? If he allowed it, she would need to sit hard up against him, and his mouth went dry at the very thought of it. What would people think? It would be verging on scandalous.

Yet... he wanted it. Even if she did not have the skill, he still wanted to try. He'd had no one to play closely with for a very long time...

A kind of madness filled him, and he nodded slightly, shifting himself across to make room for her, even as his hands simply continued playing, completely based on instinct and practice. She smiled – a devastating thing which almost made him falter, and carefully settled to the seat. Her thigh pressed against his, and he could feel her warmth, even with all of those layers of fabric between them. The scent of her wrapped about him, subtle, something not quite floral, mixed with warmer, more exotic elements. His head spun from her nearness.

She stilled completely, and closed her eyes. He could almost sense her allowing her mind to drop into the music, aligning herself with it, and with him. Then she reached out, and her fingers came to the keys, her hands effortlessly interweaving with his, as he shifted his playing to the two-part structure, and she took up the other thread of the melody.

His heart soared – she had far more skill than he might have expected, perhaps more than he had, himself, despite all of the years of practice, and she seamlessly melded her playing into his, until they moved almost as one entity, utterly sure of each other, and every momentary location of each finger.

He had never before experienced anything quite so perfect.

No matter what gossip might come of this moment, it was worth it. He wished, in that instant, that it might last forever.

Inevitably, though, the piece came to an end, and they each drew back their hands, allowing the last notes to drift into silence. A silence from which people watched them, he realised. A silence which gave way, after a few moments, to applause – applause which was led by the members of the small orchestra, who had returned, ready to play again.

Leon took a deep breath – which only served to make him more acutely aware of the scent of Lady Iris. Their eyes met, and he wanted to speak of what had just happened, to somehow prolong that perfect accord in which they had floated. But here, watched by the entire room, there was nothing he could do but deliver her a seated bow.

“My thanks, Lady Iris, for your skilful accompaniment of my playing.”

“And mine for yours.” She smiled again, her eyes speaking far more than her words. “I would hope that we might find a chance to do this again, in the future.”

“Indeed.”

He rose, as did she, and they moved away, to be soon joined by his mother and a number of other people, some of whom were obviously Lady Iris’ family. There was no space for anything approaching private conversation, and no words that he might say which would not be, one way or another, inappropriate. He rather thought that she felt the same, from her expression.

The swirling of conversation soon drew them apart, and he felt the loss of her presence acutely, even though he knew that it was for the best. If she knew the truth of his life...

It was best that she never discover the things which his family kept close, the things which prevented him from ever being able to offer her more than conversation, and music, despite his rather terrifying realisation that with her, he was quite capable of wanting more.

Thorne Gardenbrook, Marquess of Wildenhall, looked at his youngest sister and raised an eyebrow.

“Was that wise, Iris?”

Iris met his gaze, her own challenging.

“You know full well that it wasn’t, dear brother, and you also know that I could no more have stopped myself from taking that chance than Father could stop himself from obtaining more exotic plants.”

“Was it worth the gossip which will result?”

“Yes.”

“That certain?”

“Yes.”

“Worth it for the music, or worth it for the excuse to be scandalously close to Greenleigh?”

It took the utmost effort for Iris to keep her expression bland.

“Thorne! You know me – the music of course. Whilst I cannot deny that Lord Greenleigh is a well-made man, you know that for me, music is always the most important thing.”

“So the fact that he is accounted handsome, as well as being a skilled musician, has nothing to do with it?”

There really was no stopping Thorne when he decided to tease. Iris sighed, for truthfully, it was difficult to contend his point, when she did, very much, want to be close to Lord Greenleigh for more than just his magnificent musical ability. She forced her smile to its best false cheer.

“Perhaps ‘nothing’ is too strong a word.”

Thorne laughed softly.

“Then you will have a challenge ahead of you, if you wish to pursue that possibility. From everything I have heard, Greenleigh looks to consolidate his place amongst the *ton*, and in the House of

Lords, but has shown virtually no interest whatsoever in the idea of women and marriage. None of us know him well, nor did anyone know his father very well. The family have been rather reclusive. The gossips were startled that he even spent time in London these last few months.”

Iris had already come to that same conclusion, and had, in her attempts to discover more about Lord Greenleigh, found almost nothing. But such things only made her more stubborn in her intentions. Far better a man about whom little was known, than one with a reputation for debauchery and gambling.

“Perhaps. But when have any of us ever allowed a challenge to stop us? And you should be grateful. Unlike all of your other sisters, I have not sought your assistance for introductions to gentlemen. I prefer to do my own choosing of whom I may consider worthwhile – even if that means that achieving introductions is sometimes a convoluted process. I shall not give you grounds to complain about my lack of appreciation.”

Thorne laughed again.

“I will just find other things to tease you about, Iris, never fear.”

“I am sure that you will. But... if you do hear anything of interest about Lord Greenleigh, you will let me know, won’t you?”

Perhaps she was foolish to ask, but her brother was often an excellent source of information, even if the price of it was being teased.

Chapter Two

Leon lifted his hands from the keys, and the last notes died away into the silence, replaced only by the soft snoring of the young woman in the next room. Through the open double door, he could see the figure of his sister Maggie, curled under the coverlet in her bed.

Mrs Withercombe crossed through his line of sight, going to close the bedroom windows for the night. The candles in that room cast it as a scene of night in a forest, the deep green of the wallpaper added to by the shades of green of the bed hangings and the coverlet, echoed by the deep carpet on the floor. Leon shuddered, turning his eyes away.

He had come to hate green, as deeply as Maggie obsessively loved it. In every memory he had of her, in her descent from a healthy laughing child to the faded shell she now was, she was wrapped in green. It was her choice, and his father had indulged her, but over the years, it had become more than a simple liking, had become, instead, something which drove every part of her life.

He rose, and crossed the, blessedly not green, small parlour to close those windows too. Fresh air might be desirable, but this was December, Christmas Eve, and the crispness of the air suggested that there would be snow before morning. He turned back as Mrs Withercombe stepped out of his sister's bedroom, and closed the doors behind her.

“Thank you, my Lord. It's always easier to get her to sleep when you play for her.”

“It’s the least I can do – for it seems there is little other way I can help. She seems weaker every day, and more... erratic. Was it bad, while we were in London?”

Mrs Withercombe had been with them for twenty-five years now, initially as Nanny to both of them, and then, as Maggie’s illnesses began to take hold, as Maggie’s companion, and nurse. She would give him an honest answer, he knew, for she truly cared, and felt as much despair as he did at their inability to effect any kind of cure for his sister. She bustled about the room, tidying things, banking the fire, and setting the room to rights for the night. He waited, knowing that she would answer in her own time. When she did, her voice held deep sadness.

“It was... difficult. She wanted you. Wanted the music. And could not remember, from day to day, why you weren’t here, nor understand why you could see anything as important enough for you to leave her. I did what I could – I sang to her, and distracted her with reading her simple tales – but she fretted, and sometimes suffered bursts of destructive anger. We will need to buy some more ornaments for her soon, for she has smashed most of the last lot.”

“I am so sorry, Mrs Withercombe. I do not know what I can do – I cannot completely avoid my responsibilities in the House of Lords.”

“I know it. But my Lord, I am not sure how much longer her strength will last, either. Perhaps, with it being Christmas, and all the pine boughs decorating the rest of the house, it will be green enough for her... and perhaps the good food of the season will tempt her to eat more.... It worries me, though – for if it snows, if it’s too cold for her to go out into the gardens, to go into the trees, then she will want to lock herself away here – and we know that she’s worse when she does that.”

“I will do whatever I can to help, Mrs Withercombe – and thank you, for all of the years you’ve cared for her – and me, when I was a child. Without you, I am sure that I too, would have descended into a kind of madness by now.”

“Whist! Never say it, my Lord. It’s a fine man you’ve grown to be,

with a good heart too. You're stronger than you know. Between us, and your mother, we'll find a way to deal with Lady Margaret, until..."

"Yes. Until..."

Neither of them could bring themselves to say it, but each knew what the other meant.

He looked about the room, considering the pianoforte – a small instrument, but beautifully built, he had purchased it for this room, to always be there for Maggie – that was when she would still play, sometimes. It was not an instrument that he ever played for his own pleasure.

He turned, and with a nod to Mrs Withercombe, he left the room. Perhaps, if he went down to the music room, to his own pianoforte, he might play until the music swept away the aching bitter sadness, at least for a while. It would return, of course – but any respite helped him gather the strength to go on. How his mother could conceive that he would marry, when things were like this...

He shook his head as he walked along the gallery where his ancestors' portraits looked down on him, wondering – had any of them suffered so? Was the contamination one of the blood, a madness and physical decline which might appear in future generations too?

He prayed that it was not.

Once he was seated at his pianoforte, it was as if his hands had a will of their own – they began to play the piece he had played just days past, at Lady Violet Gardenbrook's wedding breakfast. It was a piece he often played, to soothe himself, to remind him that there was beauty and peace in the world, that eventually there might be an end to the nightmare he lived with. But this time, it reminded him of something else – inescapably, the memory rose of Lady Iris Gardenbrook seated so close against him, playing with him in perfect synchrony, as if they were two halves of a whole, bound together inescapably by every note that they played.

He wanted to feel that again. To desire it was madness, but he did.

The memory and the desire tangled together in his head with the music as it filled the room, and tortured him, even as it soothed his aching heart.

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January dragged on, and once the celebrations of the Christmas season had passed, Iris found herself with little to do. There were still soirees and the like to attend, but with the House of Lords not due to meet again until the end of the month, many families had gone to country estates for those few weeks.

When they returned, it would be to prepare for the Season, with all it held. But now, apart from those few thinly attended social occasions, there was nothing to amuse her, beyond, as always, her music. And dreaming of Lord Greenleigh.

The memory of that duet at Violet's wedding breakfast was never far from her thoughts, and the fact that Lord Greenleigh had left London for his estate the day after, and had not been seen in town since, drove her quite to distraction. It meant that she could not even speak to him at soirees, could not seek a chance to discover if he felt, about that duet, as she did.

She had continued to seek more information about him, and his family, but with little success – all she had found was a treatise on agricultural methods, penned by his paternal grandfather, which, whilst it showed a most forward-thinking inclination for the gentleman's era, gave no clues as to what values he might otherwise have inculcated in his family.

Even Debrett's was no help, beyond confusing her slightly with mention of him having a sister – but perhaps the sister was long married, or perhaps she had died young, as so many did, and the date simply not yet been recorded when the edition of Debrett's in their library was printed. There was nothing else of note, anywhere. The man was, truly, an enigma.

But that very elusiveness drove her to want him even more, whilst

it left her considering a most inconvenient question – how did one pursue a recluse?

She could not flirt with a man who was not there, could not apply innuendo and subtle hints to convince him of her desirability, (excepting, of course those things which might be implied using the discussion of music...), when he did not speak of anything but music.

Hopefully, he would return for the Sessions of the Lords in February, and she would at least have the chance to see him again – perhaps she could convince her mother to invite him, and his mother, to dinner? That would at least give her a chance to see him, but likely not the slightest chance to speak in anything approaching privacy – and she wanted privacy, if she was to speak of that duet.

When she played, she often found herself playing that piece, reliving the moment as she did – but it would never be the same again, without him playing it with her. And at night, as she drifted towards sleep, her deepest desires surfaced, and she imagined what it might be like to kiss him, and more. Sometimes she even wondered just how far she would be willing to go, if he continued to be stubbornly, excruciatingly ‘just a friend’, all whilst the warmth in his eyes said that he was interested in more. Would she, ever, be willing to do something she had always despised, and consider... compromise...?

That was a question to which she had not found an answer. In the end, she did not think that she could do such a thing, intentionally, for it would unfairly trap him – and she would have him choose her, without duress, if she could. But in that edge of dream state, there were days when it seemed a deeply tempting thing.

On this day, she had played for hours, and then taken herself to sit in the parlour with a book – the parlour felt odd, empty and cold, now that only Thorne and herself remained at home, of the eight children. After years of noise and constant companionship, it felt strangely lonely. Still, the fire was warm, and the tea and lemon cakes reassuringly familiar. Outside, icy sleet beat against the windows – was it raining where Lord Greenleigh was, she wondered?

That thought was interrupted when Thorne entered the room.

“Remarkable! You are actually in the parlour, rather than the music room! I will mark this day down as one to remember.”

“I do spend time in this room, frequently, my dear brother – just not at the times when you do, it seems. Perhaps it is your presence which is remarkable?”

Thorne laughed, dropping into the chair nearest her, and reaching across to scoop up two of the lemon cakes from her tea tray.

“Well, if that is so, you should appreciate my generosity in being here.”

Iris pulled a cushion from behind her, and flung it at him. He plucked it from the air, tucked it behind him with ostentatious adjusting for comfort, and grinned at her again. She glared at him.

“You really are impossible!”

He gave her a seated half bow, and went back to savouring the lemon cakes. She opened her book again, and set about actively ignoring him.

Moments later, the parlour door opened again, and they both looked up to see their father.

“Do either of you have clothing suitable for deep mourning?”

Startled, Iris shook her head.

“Last time we needed mourning was some time ago – nothing from then will still fit me – why – who has died?”

“You’d best order some then – deep mourning, ordinary mourning and half mourning – it seems likely that the King will not live much longer.”

For once, Thorne was silent, gaping at their father almost as much as Iris was. The King had not been well for many years, it was true, but somehow, this was still shocking news.

“Ah... I see. I had best visit the modiste tomorrow then – hopefully, the weather will clear by then!”

“And I will see my tailor, although I am better placed than Iris, for I have a selection of simple black attire, which can have mourning bands added to it.”

The Duke nodded.

“I will keep you informed as things progress – and obviously, this may well change which days I have to be in the House of Lords – there is due process to follow on such a momentous occasion for the Country. Your mother is considering her own wardrobe now. But, beyond the tailor and modiste, do not discuss this anywhere yet – best not to presume upon God’s timing.”

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The messenger rapped on the door of Greenleigh Park in the late evening, when the light had long since faded to night, and the sleet had become a steady light fall of snow. Leon was just coming down the stairs, his hands aching a little in the cold, for he had played for hours, until Maggie had finally drifted into sleep.

The dozing footman startled into alertness, and hurried to open the door, revealing a half frozen man in the livery of the staff of the House of Lords.

“Come inside man, so that we can shut the door!”

The messenger complied, and the footman closed out the storm with alacrity.

“My Lord...”

The messenger fumbled in the bag he carried, his hands numbed by the cold, then produced a sealed document. Leon took it, then turned to the footman.

“See this man to the kitchens, and make sure that he is warmed and given a decent meal. And ask Mrs Hartford to have a guest room made up for him, and a fire set in its grate – this is no night to be out in the weather.”

The messenger bowed, obviously grateful, and was led away, leaving Leon standing there, holding the sealed message. What could be of so much import that a message would be sent, now, when he had planned to be in London within the week anyway, for the next sitting of the Lords?

He turned, and went to his study, where he poured himself a sizeable brandy before settling into the armchair before the fire. Only once the brandy warmed him from the inside, did he break the seal on that ominously official paper. The words inside were formal, yet, for a communication relating to the House of Lords and the monarchy, minimal, stark – yet of a nature which, in an instant, changed the world.

The King was dead, today, the 29th of January 1820. The Prince Regent had acceded to the throne. A coronation would follow in due course.

And he, as all the other Lords, was summoned to London, to the proceedings within the House which would set in motion the formal transition from one King to the next, whilst maintaining order in the Kingdom.

A grim laugh escaped him.

At least he, as the rest of his family, was well supplied with mourning clothes, being but four months out of mourning for his father.

He had best go up and set Belling to packing, before he informed his mother, or attended to dinner for himself. As he hurried up the stairs, he prayed that the morning would bring clear skies, and passable roads, or even the relatively short distance to London would take the full day.

Chapter Three

Greenleigh House was a welcome sight after a day of formal matters – a day in which Leon had felt most strange, for, being dressed in full mourning was rather strange when one was not also in seclusion from society. To go about daily business while dressed that way felt wrong – yet here he was, as was every person of the *ton*, doing just that, in respect for the King's passing.

In his home, he could choose to wear something other than unrelieved black – at least when there was no chance of anyone but his mother and the staff seeing him. Not that his wardrobe boasted anything flamboyant, but even small touches of lightness were worthwhile.

He worried, though, about Maggie. She had been terribly distressed by his and Mother's departure, and by their mourning clothes, becoming frantic with the belief that someone else very close to her must have died. In the end, Mrs Withercombe had found it necessary to resort to laudanum to get her to sleep at all the previous night.

They had decided that, whilst he must stay in London for at least the next few weeks, his mother would spend half of each week at Greenleigh Park to attend to Maggie. That decision left Leon wracked with guilt, yet he could see no other option – he needed to be here, needed to be seen in the House, and in society, to do his formal duty, and establish himself as a sober and respectable man in the opinion of those in power.

He settled at the pianoforte after dinner, and allowed his cares to

fade away into music – and into the memory of Lady Iris Gardenbrook.

Would he see her at any social events? There were still quiet events held, even with the mourning, and he would attend some of them. Seeing her would not be the same as playing a duet with her... but it would perhaps at least allow them a conversation on the subject of music, even if not the conversation he would like to have with her...

He played that piece again – the one which now seemed barely real without her beside him – and tried his best to forget about everything else. To forget his poor ailing sister, to forget the strain which lived forever on Mrs Withercombe's face, and his mother's, to forget the fact that his life was wrapped in tight bonds by the secrets he must keep.

For the first time, the music failed him – it eased the pain, but he could no longer use it to forget – not now that it was inextricably bound up in his mind with the woman he wanted, yet could not allow himself to have.

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Iris sighed, regarding herself in the mirror.

Black did not suit her – it made her pale skin look sallow, and her dark gold hair look tarnished. Eight weeks. So only another six weeks and she could change to less deep mourning colours. And then another four weeks after that before she could shed mourning entirely. Surely she could cope for that long, especially as everyone else had to suffer it too. It would make the latter part of the Season even more bright and colourful than usual, she was sure, once everyone shed the dark shades of visible grief. She fidgeted, wanting to move.

“Do sit still, my Lady, so that I can pin these jet beads into place in your hair.” Lina, her maid, sounded only a little annoyed, for she had been maid to Iris for three years now, and knew full well that Iris loathed the drabness of black which deep mourning required. “There. That should stay in place for the evening.”

“Thank you, Lina.”

Iris rose, and went downstairs, knowing that her mother and Thorne would be waiting. They were to attend a quiet musicale at Lady Wells’ home – a musicale at which, no doubt, only the most drear and funereal of pieces would be presented. Even loving music as she did, Iris could not bring herself to enjoy an entire evening of mournful works.

Perhaps, if she were lucky, Lord Greenleigh would be there, and they might manage a conversation about more uplifting music? She had seen him only twice since the King’s death, and on neither of those occasions had there been the opportunity for more than a most formal greeting. Their eyes had met, and each time, she had been filled with the sensation that he wanted to say so much more, as she did, that he harboured feelings for her which could not be openly spoken of.

But perhaps she was simply deluding herself.

If so, it was a delusion she would persist in, until such time as his feelings were proven, one way or the other.

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She had smiled at him, and their eyes had met, filled with their shared horror at the painful sounds being presented as music, but there had been no opportunity, yet again, for them to speak beyond a stilted greeting. Now, as he settled into the carriage for the short journey back to Greenleigh House, he wondered if he would ever have more than those stolen glances with her again.

“...possibly suitable to marry? Leon, have you heard anything I’ve just said?”

He blinked, and brought his eyes to his mother.

“Ah... I have not, I am ashamed to admit. Please, repeat it, and I will give you my full attention.”

She shook her head slightly, sighed, and began again.

“I asked you if, amongst the young ladies you have met, you have discovered any yet whom you might consider possibly suitable to marry? Surely, this period of mourning for the King provides an opportunity to see how they comport themselves when they must be sedate and respectable at all times.”

“Mother, I have told you before – I cannot see how I can possibly consider marriage, when the situation with Maggie is as it is – and getting worse! Surely you cannot suggest that she is improving?”

For a moment, his mother’s face was twisted with grief and pain – then that expression was firmly wiped away.

“Perhaps a little. These last few weeks, as the weather has warmed from the coldest part of winter, she has been stronger – strong enough to go outside, which has made her happier. But... it is most variable. Some days she is wracked with coughing such that she can barely move, sometimes her body rejects all food, sometimes she claws at her skin until it bleeds, declaring there to be an unbearable itching. Every time that I feel some hope, it is dashed again. But no matter Maggie’s state, you must marry. You will need an heir, and your wife will simply have to do as you require, and keep Maggie’s existence as private as we do. I... I cannot see that it will be necessary for too much longer.”

Her voice caught, and Leon reached out to place his hand on her arm.

“I know, though I desperately wish that I could find a way to change that. But can you not see – that is exactly why I cannot marry – I must be patient, and attend on God’s will in the matter of my sister. I would not force any woman I married to live with the challenges we do, nor require her silence on the subject – what basis for a marriage would it be, if I did such things?”

“A basis no different from that of most society marriages. And... I would hope that having a wife might bring you some consolation in the face of the difficulties we must deal with every day.”

“Mother, no. I will not put a woman in that position – that would be taking my own comfort at the expense of hers. Do not ask it of me.”

“I do ask it of you. But I also can be patient. In time, you will come around to my way of seeing things.”

“I very much doubt that.”

The rest of the carriage journey passed in silence, and they did not speak of the matter again that week, before his mother returned to Greenleigh Park.

The next few weeks brought nothing different – his mother came to town for a few days at a time, bearing slowly worsening news of Maggie, and Leon immersed himself in the matters before the House of Lords, whilst actively avoiding social occasions, and any conversation with Lady Iris Gardenbrook at those events he could not refuse to attend.

By mid-March, he felt exhausted by it all, as if he walked in a world of perpetual darkness and misery, where black clad people struggled to ever smile, even though the early spring flowers were beginning to fill the London parks.

The few times he went to Greenleigh Park for a short visit only made it worse, as Maggie clung to him, demanding that he stay with her, that he play for her at every hour of the day. There was not the tiniest trace left of the girl his sister had once been, in this creature who now wore her skin.

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“Your grandmother will be attending the soiree this evening, with us. Lady Gillieston is one of her oldest friends, and she has decided that, after months shut away, she really must take this chance to see Lady Gillieston again.”

“But... Grandmother has barely spoken to us for two years...”

Leon’s mother nodded.

“Which in no way stopped her from demanding that I, as her

daughter, ensure that you arranged for us to collect her tonight. I suspect that she will simply pretend that everything is wonderful, or that Maggie doesn't exist. I doubt that she has yet forgiven me for bearing a daughter who suffers so obvious and terrible a weakness, but it is more convenient for her to be able to call on me for assistance than not."

"I see. Then I will be as polite as is required, but do not expect me to greet her with any effusiveness."

"I won't."

They finished their tea in silence after that, and soon Leon went up to dress for the evening, after first giving instructions for the coachman to bring the carriage round a half hour earlier, to allow the extra time for collecting Lady Neelsham.

Two hours later, as he sat in Lady Neelsham's parlour waiting for her to come down, his tea long cold beside him, he wondered if he should have made that an hour earlier. His grandmother appeared to believe that the entire world could wait on her whim, and was now proving that her daughter and grandson would do as she wished, regardless. But perhaps that was uncharitable of him.

Finally, the sound of footsteps on the stairs presaged her arrival. Leon rose, as did his mother, and stepped out into the foyer.

"Let us be on our way then, Greenleigh – no time to tarry."

Leon gritted his teeth, and forced a smile to his lips.

"Of course, Grandmother."

He offered her his arm, and escorted her to the carriage. This evening, he could see, was not likely to be at all enjoyable.

No sooner had the carriage door closed behind them, than Lady Neelsham fixed Leon with a stern gaze, and spoke abruptly.

"Not married yet then? Disgraceful. You need an heir – and pray that whatever child your father is not afflicted with the madness that's taken your sister. A madness which does not run in your mother's side of the family, I remind you... you'd best choose a young lady of the

highest possible breeding, and soon.”

What could he say to that?

“Grandmother, I am not ready to marry yet.”

“Balderdash! Of course you are. Just choose a woman – or are you being affected by this modern whimsy of expecting a love match?”

“Not especially. I am considering ladies, but none have truly appealed to me yet.”

The carriage halted outside Lady Gillieston’s home.

“Well tonight I’m sure there will be a few suitable ones present – why don’t you just pick one of them?”

Leon shook his head, his heart sinking, but was saved from answering by the footman opening the carriage door. They went up the steps in silence, and once through the receiving line, Leon took the chance to escape from his grandmother’s proximity on the excuse of greeting gentlemen he knew.

After a few short conversations, he turned to see Lady Iris Gardenbrook entering the room. She was, somehow, more beautiful than ever, even dressed in the stark black of deep mourning. His grandmother’s words came back to him – *‘just pick one of them’* – and, unbidden, the thought rose – *If I had to choose a woman tonight, it would be Lady Iris.*

That thought shocked him a little, and he turned his gaze away from her. She was temptation incarnate – beautiful, musically gifted and, he was quite certain from their previous encounters, not averse to his company. And if he was to be true to his stated intentions, that meant avoiding her, completely. He would not ever, intentionally, put a woman he cared for as much as he cared for her in the position of having to deal with his family.

Near him, a door opened, showing him a view of a hallway beyond – without further thought, he moved, slipping through the door and down that hall. Perhaps he could find a music room, and distract himself from the social horror that the evening seemed fit to be, and the temptation of Lady Iris’ presence.

Iris had been surreptitiously watching Lord Greenleigh from the moment that she had realised he was present. Every time they had seen each other for near two months now, he had been polite, distant, and impossible to talk to. Her patience was wearing thin, even as her determination increased. Perhaps tonight, there would be a chance...

Then, as she sipped at a glass of orgeat whilst her mother spoke with Lady Gillieston, she saw him quietly leave the large parlour by way of a door on the other side of the room – a door which, if she remembered rightly, led to a hallway which ran towards the back of the house. This was her chance!

She tapped her mother on the shoulder and whispered in her ear.

“Mother – I’m going to the necessary.”

The Duchess gave a nod, never really pausing in her conversation, and Iris deposited her glass on a side table, and crossed the room, her heart beating hard. Once through that door, she set off down the hallway, wondering where Lord Greenleigh might have gone, and whether there was anywhere in this direction which might provide her with the chance to speak to him privately.

Then it came to her – at the end of this hall, there was a music room.... She almost ran down the empty hall until she reached that door, then paused, peering inside.

Lord Greenleigh was there! He settled onto the pianoforte bench as she watched and Iris took a deep breath, then slipped into the room, quietly closing the door behind her. Now, she was scandalously alone with him, and the small voice of reason urged her to turn back. She pushed it aside – she had waited months for a chance like this, and she wasn’t going to waste it!

Chapter Four

Lady Neelsham, whilst to all appearances absolutely fascinated by the gossip which Lady Gillieston was imparting to her, was actually watching her grandson closely. It had become patently obvious that her daughter was not going to do her duty and see the boy settled with a suitable wife – which meant that she would simply have to take on that task herself.

And now, as she watched, Greenleigh slipped out of the room. Was he actively avoiding the company of young ladies? She rather suspected that he was, and irritation flared – her granddaughter was lost to the ravages of a strange wasting madness, and she wanted to see her grandson wed, and breeding healthy children before she died, to wash that distasteful fact from her mind. Lady Gillieston droned on, and Lady Neelsham counted the minutes. If he did not reappear within a reasonable time, she would gather up his irresponsible mother and go in search of him.

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The click of the door closing alerted him, and he spun around on the bench, annoyed that this sanctuary he had found was already being stolen from him, before he had even played one note. But what he saw shocked him to immobility, his breath caught in his throat.

Lady Iris Gardenbrook pushed herself away from the door she had just closed, her hand falling to her side, and, holding his gaze, she

walked across the room until she stood beside him. Her soft footsteps were the only sound, although his heart beat so hard in his chest that he wondered she could not hear it, playing counterpoint to her steps.

For a long moment, neither of them spoke. He simply stared into those sky-blue eyes, watching clouds of some deep emotion flit across them, filled with the desire to reach out and touch her. But he did not. He knew that he should ask her to leave, or leave himself, that this moment was beyond scandalous in all ways. But he did not speak. The silence stretched, until she smiled, that smile that left him feeling as if he had never been smiled at before, so bright was it, so devastatingly conspiratorial.

“I...” her voice was just a little shaky, “I wanted to speak to you, about... that... that duet... it was...”

Her words trailed away, as if she could find no way to express her feelings. He could understand that – he felt the same.

“It was. I agree.”

She smiled again as he spoke, and he felt that somehow, what had just been said was so much more than the words used. It felt like a declaration.

She swallowed, and her tongue flicked out to nervously trace the line of her lips – lips which, in that instant, he wanted to kiss.

“I want...”

There was that hesitation again, as if she were afraid that he would reject what she was about to say. In that instant, he knew that there was no possible chance of that – he would not, no matter what she said or did, reject her, despite the fact that every moment they stayed here together risked discovery and ruin for her, and the destruction of his carefully kept façade which protected his family’s secrets.

“You want?”

His voice was as uneven as hers had been. Suddenly, as if she no longer had the strength to stand, she dropped to sit beside him on the pianoforte bench. There was not enough room, and he quickly caught her about the waist to prevent her from falling, even as he edged

across and made space for her to sit properly.

At his touch, she gasped – but it was not a sound of horror or annoyance, more one of pleasure. It was a sound that heated his blood, and made his head spin in a manner that he had never experienced before. She tilted her head up and met his eyes, her face mere inches from his, her lips so close... He bent his head and brushed a kiss across those lips, a madness of the moment making him risk everything to taste her.

That thought made him pull back – madness? What if it lay in his blood too, as it did in Maggie's? She frowned slightly, then spoke at barely a whisper.

“Yes. That is one thing I want. But also, I want...” She moved her hand to trail across the pianoforte keys. “I want to play that duet again, as I would wish to play a thousand duets with you, forever, if each could feel even a tiny part as good as I felt when we played at Violet's wedding breakfast.”

He wanted that too, he realised as she said it – a lifetime of magical duets with this woman, whose heart and soul seemed so utterly in tune with his. He could not say that, could not admit how right it felt to hold her, he should run from the room now before he did something unforgiveable, and doomed her to sharing the miseries of his daily life.

Music seemed far safer than words, and he could not bear to leave her, when they had the chance to create that magic again. He reached out a hand to the keys, slowly allowing his other hand to release her waist, sad only that the price of playing with her was no longer cradling her against him. Then, thighs pressed hard together, they began to play, the first notes of the piece filling the room.

It was as if his fingers on the keys declared his feelings, saying all of the dangerous things which he could not permit to exist as words, or even clear thoughts, and a great sense of rightness wrapped him around. It was a remarkable moment, but it lasted barely past the first few bars of the piece, before the sudden opening of the door shattered everything.

Thorne stepped into the hallway of Lady Gillieston's home beside Merryfield, who had suggested that there were actually things in the library here worth seeing – and Merryfield should know, as Lady Gillieston was his aunt. They had taken but a few steps in the direction of that library, when a shriek rang out from further down the hall.

“What on Earth?”

“I’ve no idea – but I expect we should investigate.”

They hurried towards the sound, which had come from an open doorway – a doorway which proved to lead to a music room, in which a drama of epic proportions was playing out. A drama in which his sister, Iris, appeared to be playing a leading role.

Thorne stood there aghast, listening, trying to understand what was happening, despite the sinking feeling which filled him, of a frightening certainty about the matter.

Iris was floating. He had kissed her! And now they were playing. Life was, at that moment, perfect, no matter what might come later. It was a perfection which shattered into a million shards of horror seconds later, as the door opened, crashing back against the wall.

“What is the meaning of this? Greenleigh, what have you done?”

At the voice, they had both turned where they sat, hands dropping from the keys to leave a last, nearly discordant, tangle of notes fading away. Iris recognised one of the two women who stood there – Greenleigh's mother – but not the other, older woman – although from the look of her, Iris would guess that she was Lady Greenleigh's mother – Lord Greenleigh's grandmother. She could feel the tension in the man beside her, where their thighs still lay so close together.

“Grandmother. We are simply playing the pianoforte.”

The old woman drew herself up and positively sniffed in disdain.

“Alone in a closed room, with an unmarried young woman. There is nothing simple about that. There is, however, everything scandalous about it. And for this kind of scandal, there is only one remedy. Marriage. You’ll have to marry her.”

Iris gaped at the woman in shock, then forced herself to compose her expression. She did not like being told what to do, especially by strangers. *But*, came the insidious thought, *marrying Lord Greenleigh would not be a bad thing, surely?* Still, she should protest, should declare the innocence of their actions, for, despite that kiss, it was not at all fair that he should be forced to something because she had sought him out here.

“But we were just playing a duet. Surely there can be no...”

“Of course there can, young woman, and there is. It’s utterly scandalous, and now you’ll have to marry him. What is your name? I don’t believe that we’ve been introduced.”

Iris swallowed, and drew herself up, determined not to be intimidated.

“I am Lady Iris Gardenbrook, daughter of the Duke of Elbury. Might I know your name in return?”

The woman studied her, and Iris thought that there was a spark of amusement in her brown eyes.

“So, you’ve some courage about you, have you? And a Duke’s daughter? Things could be worse, could be worse indeed. Greenleigh, at least you’ve had the sense to disgrace yourself with a woman suitable to be your wife. I am the Dowager Lady Neelsham, and this reprobate’s grandmother.”

Even as Lady Neelsham spoke those words, behind her, in the doorway, Iris saw Thorne and Merryfield, and past them, a small crowd of other people. If there had ever been any hope of keeping this from public knowledge, that hope was gone.

Iris turned her gaze back to Lord Greenleigh, who had sat through that exchange, silent beside her. What was he thinking? What would

he do? Would he reject her now? For if he did, that would be even more scandalous. Not that her father would force her to marry him, should she choose not to, but to not do so now would add a whole extra layer of scandal, and doom her to never finding a good match at all.

He met her eyes, and for a short time they simply sat there, ignoring everyone and everything around them. Emotions chased themselves across his face in rapid succession – some compound of sadness, regret, hope, and almost, desire? Then he smiled at her, a smile which made him seem magnificently handsome, and which steadied her – surely, he would not smile so if he was going to reject her?

He lifted his hand and gently cupped her cheek, as if no one else was present.

“Lady Iris Gardenbrook, if you will have me, I would marry you, and resolve this... difficulty... we find ourselves in. Will you be my wife?”

Across the room, she heard movement, and a flurry of whispering. She held Lord Greenleigh’s eyes, wanting to be sure, and finding certainty there – whatever it was that worried him, it was not her. She had dreamed that there might come a time when she would marry him, but this was certainly not the circumstance in which she had expected it to occur. Why he might have so rapidly acquiesced to his grandmother’s demands, when he had been so avoiding of any contact for months, she did not know – but she would not turn aside such a gift as he had just given her, especially as she wanted him.

“Yes. I will marry you, and gladly, my Lord.”

“Iris, are you certain?”

It was her father who spoke, and she turned back to discover him, with her mother and Thorne, but a few feet away. He looked deeply worried, as did her mother, and she knew that they were torn between wanting to avoid scandal if they could, and wanting only the best for Iris.

“Yes Father, I am certain. This is what I wish, no matter how... unusual... the circumstances.”

Her father studied her, as if trying to see if she told the truth, then nodded.

“So be it then. It would appear that we have an urgent wedding to arrange.”

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Leon sat there, an odd warmth filling him, a sensation he had never previously felt. He had been mad enough to do as his grandmother had demanded, and Lady Iris had said yes. There had been nothing but care for him in her eyes when she had done so, no hesitation. To have someone look at him like that, to want to marry him, filled him with hope. He had not known just how deeply he needed to be wanted, until now.

Despite what he would face when Lady Iris first met Maggie, despite the challenges which would follow, in the moment, all he cared for was the fact that she had said yes, and he was quite sure that it was not simply to preserve her reputation.

Chapter Five

They had left the soiree rather rapidly after the dramatic events in the music room, surrounded by the scandalised whispers of the guests. Tomorrow, Lord Greenleigh and his mother would call at Elbury House, and arrangements would be made. There would, Iris knew, be a special licence obtained, and the marriage would be quiet, private, and very soon.

Her mother was annoyed with her – not, she suspected, because of the scandalous nature of events, but because the situation, combined with the ongoing mourning for the King, meant that there was not to be a large wedding – and her mother loved arranging large weddings. Now, as the carriage conveyed them home, there was an uncomfortable silence. Iris had never felt uncomfortable with her family before, and found herself quite lost and unsure of everything. Everything, that was, but for the fact that she was to marry Lord Greenleigh. That was something which she was pleased by, and most certain about, no matter what anyone else might think or say.

Once home, they went into the parlour, and called for a tea tray. The Duchess fixed Iris with her sternest expression and sighed.

“What have you done, Iris? I never thought that you might act so! You’ve always been so well behaved! You must go through with this now – there is no turning back.”

“I am aware of that Mother. And... I am quite content with marrying Lord Greenleigh.”

“How can you be? You barely know him.”

“I know enough to be sure, Mother.”

The Duchess shook her head, and turned to her husband.

“Then it seems, husband, that we must discuss many things before the morrow brings Lord Greenleigh to our door. We will leave you here, Iris.”

The Duke took the Duchess’ arm, and patted her hand reassuringly.

“Let us settle in my study, and plan it all out. Good evening Iris, Thorne.”

The Duchess looked back at Iris just as they went out the door.

“Make sure that you rise early tomorrow – there will be much to do.”

And then her parents were gone, leaving Iris sitting with her brother in the silent room. The mantel clock ticked loudly, and the fire in the grate crackled, reminding Iris that soon, this would no longer be her home – that this warmth and comfort which had always been hers would not be so, anymore. She would need to find new comfort in a strange place.

For the first time, the prospect of what she was about to do seemed a little frightening.

“Iris...” Thorne’s voice was soft, “are you truly sure that this is what you want? There would be scandal, yes, but if you do not wish to marry him, we will find a way to break the betrothal.”

She lifted her gaze from the flickering flames of the fire, and met his eyes. That her brother cared enough for her happiness to be willing to brave that sort of scandal, if she wished it, warmed her and reminded her that her family truly loved her.

“I am sure, Thorne. I... I think that I have been half in love with him since the very first time that I saw him, at Lady Ormondston’s musicale. It is no hardship to marry him. I am sorry that it has come about in a scandalous manner, and that I have deprived Mother of her chance to organise another extravagant wedding celebration, but I do not regret it for one moment.”

“Then I wish you well of it. You know that, should you ever need help, you can always call on me?”

“I do, but I do not expect to need to.”

He nodded, but his eyes said that he was not as confident as she.

“Then finish your tea, and go up to bed – if we are to rise early and suffer the entire process of wedding planning compressed into a single day, then you will need as much sleep as you can get.”

Iris laughed, for the image of her Mother trying to do absolutely everything in a single day was indeed comic.

“I will sleep well – and tomorrow, I will simply let Mother arrange as she wishes, and if anyone chooses to argue with her, let it be Lady Greenleigh, not me.”

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The minister regarded Iris sternly as she stepped into the large parlour, but she barely noticed – her eyes went straight to Lord Greenleigh where he waited for her. He was handsome as always, and his dark blue eyes lit with pleasure when he saw her. That expression sent heat through her entire body, reinforcing for her just how right this was, no matter how they had come to this point.

Her father led her forward, and the people in the room – just her extended family, and Lord Greenleigh’s – all watched her, most with broad smiles. She stopped beside Lord Greenleigh, and her father stepped away, the symbolism of that moment not lost on her.

There was silence, and then the minister began to speak, his words binding her to the man beside her, irrevocably. It was exhilarating, and yet also frightening, that so short a timespan and so few words could change so much, forever. Despite that, she was still sure, in her heart and soul, that this was the right thing, that he truly was the right man for her.

And then it was done. She was married. Lord Greenleigh – Leonard, she now knew his forename to be - gently tipped her chin up,

and brushed a soft kiss over her lips. She shivered, wishing that they were alone. But then he drew back, and their family gathered around, offering congratulations. Her new husband's grandmother said little – which seemed rather out of character, but Iris put that thought aside for later consideration.

The Duchess swept them all out of the parlour, and along to the ballroom, where tables had been laid out with food and drink. To Iris, it seemed strange – a disconcerting echo of her sister's wedding breakfast, only three months before. A rather ghostly, faded echo, lacking a vast quantity of people and activity. She looked up at the man beside her, to find him looking at her, his eyes full of the same uncertainty she felt.

She smiled, and reached out to place her hand on his arm, suddenly needing to feel his warmth, to know that he was real. He covered her hand with his. She swallowed, emboldened by that touch, and spoke softly, so that only he might hear.

“I admit that I am not sure what we might do to pass the next few hours – with only family present, it is not as if the event will go on as most wedding breakfasts do...”

His lips twisted into a wry smile.

“That is true, although... your family seems vast, compared to mine.”

“We can be rather overwhelming, when we are all in the same place, especially now that all of my sisters have husbands too. But I promise you, as a family, we are universally prone to cheerfulness.”

Something flickered in his expression, something almost of sadness, and then was gone.

“If that is the case, then I am most grateful. But... rather than us simply standing here, looking uncertain, perhaps we should do something which we know we will both find pleasant?”

He lifted his hand from hers for a moment, and waved to the side, where the pianoforte stood, its golden timbers shining in the morning sun which came through the tall windows. Iris felt her heart beat

harder, and her breath catch. Now, no one could disapprove, no one would interrupt them, or try to stop them.

“Yes. I believe that we began a duet at Lady Gillieston’s, which we were unfortunately prevented from completing. This seems a most appropriate time to remedy that issue.”

His eyes lit with pleasure at her words.

“Then let us waste no time in starting, for if we hesitate, I am quite sure that someone will feel it necessary to come and speak with us.”

He led her across the room, and they settled beside each other on the pianoforte bench, the heat of him so close beside her intense, and stimulating all of her senses. But, once they began to play, even that faded away, and there was only the music, and the effortless connection within it, to the man who seemed, when playing, the other half of her soul.

On the opposite side of the room, Lady Greenleigh stood with Lady Neelsham.

“I am so glad that he looks happy. I have worried, for years now, that my son would never have happiness...”

Lady Neelsham snorted almost derisively.

“Happiness? That’s not necessary for a successful marriage. But yes, he looks so now, doesn’t he? We’ll see just how long that lasts once she is told the truth, once she meets your mad daughter. But there’s no going back for her now – she’s married him, and she’ll have to live with it, whether she likes it or not.”

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Iris released a huge sigh as they settled into the carriage. Opposite her, Lina scrunched into the corner of the carriage seat, eyeing Lord Greenleigh with deep uncertainty. Iris was glad to have her familiar maid with her, but it did mean that she could not yet speak privately with Lord Greenleigh.

His fingers twined with hers, offering silent reassurance, and she allowed herself to lean back, to rest against him, ever so slightly. There would be time enough for talking once they reached Greenleigh House – her new home.

That seemed a very strange concept, but it was now the truth. She would simply have to adapt. At least Lady Greenleigh – oh! The Dowager Lady Greenleigh, for Iris was now Lady Greenleigh! – had been kind enough to go to stay with Lady Neelsham tonight, and they would have the house to themselves, apart from the staff. Staff... staff she did not know, staff who were now hers to direct. It was another thing which felt very odd.

The carriage stopped, and moments later, a footman opened the door, and let down the steps. Lord Greenleigh stepped out, and turned to offer her his hand. She took it, and went down the steps, her eyes on the tall façade of the house before her. It was of five stories, with a delicate iron edged balcony on one of the upper floors. Imposing. She shivered as he led her up the steps and, behind her, the footman helped Lina down, and then set about unloading her luggage. Most of her belongings would be sent over tomorrow - tonight, she had just the minimum necessary.

The door opened, and a line of staff awaited her in the marble floored foyer. Lord Greenleigh nodded to the butler, and led her through the door. For a large house, the number of staff was quite small, but Iris smiled, hoping that they were pleased for their master, rather than regarding her as an interloper. Lord Greenleigh touched her arm.

“My dear, let me present the staff.” He turned towards the staff, who stood in silence. “Ladies and gentlemen, this is my wife, Iris, Lady Greenleigh – your new mistress.”

Iris drew herself up, and assumed her best smile.

“I am delighted to meet all of you. Husband, might I know the names of each person?”

“Certainly – this is our butler, Mr Jarrett, and this, our

housekeeper, Mrs Earnshaw, and this our Cook, Mrs Harding. These are the footmen, [Jones and Fogg](#), and the maids, [Emma, Annie, Jenny, and Abby](#). You'll meet the stable master and the grooms tomorrow, as well as the kitchen maids."

Iris regarded each of them, trying her best to memorise all of the names.

"Thank you for welcoming me. I will want to spend some time with each of you over the next few days, to come to a good understanding of the running of this household. But for now, if we might have a tea tray in the parlour, and if one of you would show my maid, Lina," Iris indicated Lina, who had just come through the door, followed by a footman with her two trunks, "to my rooms, and the room that will be hers, I would be most grateful."

There was a moment of silence, as if they all assessed her, then Mrs Earnshaw stepped forward.

"Yes, my Lady. Abby, you see to the tea tray once Cook has it ready, and Lina, if you'll come with me, I'll show you the rooms now."

They turned, and the staff scattered about their work. Beside her, Leon released a breath – had he been afraid that the staff would not accept her orders? His hand gently caught her by the elbow.

"The family parlour is just up one floor – it will be far more pleasant than the big parlour down here, and Mrs Earnshaw will have made certain that the fire is laid in there."

"Thank you. Tomorrow, you'll have to show me where everything is. It is the strangest feeling to stand in a house that is now my home, and not have the least idea where anything might be found."

"I will show you everything... tomorrow... but – there is one thing I would like to show you tonight."

Iris looked up at him, suddenly uncertain of everything – what did he mean?

"Yes?"

"The Music Room."

The uncertainty retreated as she nodded, and he led her up the stairs.

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Leon had not realised just how worried he was about the staff accepting Iris' new status as the mistress of the house, until the moment when Mrs Earnshaw had paused before accepting her orders. Now, relief filled him as he led his delightful new wife up the stairs. That was one potential hurdle dealt with. Admittedly, those that remained were large, and might yet destroy all hope he had of happiness, but it was at least a beginning.

Telling her about Maggie's existence could come later, once they'd had a few days to get to know each other a little. He frowned, worried again – but this time, about the matter of the marital bed. He would not, he decided, make any move to take what was a husband's by right, until Iris made it obvious that she was receptive to such things.

He desired her, that was unquestionable – he had, almost from the moment that he had first seen her, and the alignment of their musical abilities had intensified that feeling, but he had no knowledge of her feelings on the matter. That she cared for him to some degree was obvious, and he was very glad of it, but he would not presume on the degree of that care. Indeed, perhaps a courtship was in order, now, given that there had been no chance for anything of the kind before their marriage.

How she might react to that choice on his part, he did not know, but he hoped that she would be glad of more time to get to know him, and for them to indulge in music together, before facing things far more emotionally complex.

They went in through the door of the music room, and he turned his thoughts away from doubts and darkness, to focus on her appreciation of the instruments she saw before her.

Chapter Six

“This is a beautiful pianoforte.”

The slight echo of the last notes they had played faded away into silence. The room was dark around them, lit only by the single candle they had brought, but it seemed to Iris a comforting darkness, wrapped in the warmth of shared music.

“I commissioned it specifically for this room – music has always been my solace, no matter what else happens in my life.”

His voice, as he said those words, seemed to carry a greater depth of meaning, to imply that there had been many things which had driven him to seek solace. A shiver ran through her, as it brought home to her just how little she knew about the man she had married.

“Should we not go to the parlour? If they bring the tea tray and do not find us...”

“They will assume that we are here – or that I am, at least – in that, I am a most predictable man.”

He gave a soft laugh, self-deprecating.

Greatly daring, Iris touched his hand, and he curled his fingers through hers.

“Still, I would not like to start out by confusing the staff, who do not yet know anything of me.”

He rose, drawing her up with him.

“Then the parlour it is.”

The parlour was located closer to the stairs, back past a selection of portraits which seemed to watch them from the walls as the flicker of candlelight momentarily highlighted their eyes. What would those ancestors have thought of her? Did any of those pictured still live? She would have to ask about his family – but tomorrow would do. First, she had to get past the rest of tonight.

And whilst the music had settled her, reinforcing the rightness of her connection with this man, one thing concerned her. Would he expect, tonight, to exercise his right to her body? She was not at all certain how she felt about that, despite quite a few conversations with her married sisters on the subject of what happened in the marital bed.

It was not that she did not find him appealing – he was a very handsome man, and his touch on her hand made her breath come faster, inducing a most unusual warmth in her body – but, somehow, the idea of such intense intimacy, when they knew so little of each other, seemed wrong. She wanted to come to that moment without any uncertainty – in her, or in him.

The tea tray awaited them in the parlour, with the maid Abby, who looked completely uncertain of what to do next. Iris took a steadying breath – now was the time to quietly assert her position, again.

“Thank you, Abby, I don’t believe that we will need anything else from you this evening.” The girl bobbed a curtsey, looking almost relieved, and scurried from the room. Iris settled onto the couch beside Leon (for he had told her, earlier, that he preferred to be called so, rather than by his full forename), and spoke, as she reached for the teapot to pour. “It’s almost as if they expect me to be disagreeable and unkind to them. Do you know why?”

Her husband – oh, how strange it seemed to say that, even in her thoughts – took the offered cup of tea and gave a wry smile.

“Not really. Perhaps because they had so little warning, and I had previously declared that I did not intend to marry at any time soon. Perhaps because my mother, whilst mostly a pleasant woman, can be rather dictatorial when stressed – a characteristic which I believe she

inherited from my grandmother, much though she would probably deny it.”

He stopped, and sipped his tea. Iris had the strangest feeling that he had intended to say more, but had cut his words short.

“Having seen your grandmother and mother together, I can imagine that to be true.”

Silence fell between them, and extended, touched only by the soft clink of the cups on saucers, and the crackle of the fire in the grate. She wanted to speak of the night to come, to discover his thoughts and expectations, but was not brave enough to begin – did he feel the same? It was all very well to have wanted this man, to have been happy to marry him, but now, to her chagrin, she discovered that she did not know how to go on as a married woman, at all.

After some time, he set his cup down, and turned to her. She met his eyes, waiting, caught by the emotion that she saw in their dark blue depths. He lifted a hand to cup her cheek.

“I... Iris...”

He stopped, and for a moment, she saw her own uncertainties reflected in him. Then, with a soft groan, he bent his head and kissed her. It began softly, but soon changed to something deeper as his lips brushed hers, and his tongue teased its way into her mouth, exploring. Heat flooded her, and she dared to lift her hand in turn, to tangle it in the hair at the back of his neck, even as she returned the kiss.

It was better than she had dreamed it to be, and its warmth eased some of her hesitation about the night – and the days - to come. Then, just when she had begun to melt against him, to want to explore a little further, he drew back, almost sharply.

“Oh!”

“I’m sorry... I should not have presumed...”

They spoke almost at once, then both paused. When Iris simply waited, her heart pounding, and disappointment filling her, he went on.

“Iris – I know that we are married, but... we barely know each other. It is unreasonable of me to presume that you would want my kisses...”

She studied his face – was he being chivalrous? Did he truly care for her at all? Had he married her only because of the compromise? Had that kiss been a test – which she had failed? Confusion filled her.

“I... I do not object to your kisses. You may remember that, just before the ‘moment of compromise’, you had kissed me, and I told you then that I wanted it.”

She felt heat in her cheeks as she flushed, but they needed to speak of this. His fingers traced the curve of her face.

“I... yes, I remember you saying that. But still, it has all been very sudden, and I would not press you in any way.”

A coil of sadness filled her – no matter her own hesitations, she realised that she wanted him to want her – and this felt as if, perhaps, he did not. She must make the best of it, then, until she could discover more of the truth of his feelings. Surely, they could not be so perfectly aligned in music, and not be so in other ways?

“Tonight. I... will you... will we...?”

Internally, she cursed her inability to speak of such things openly. A small smile twisted his lips, and as she watched it, she ached for those lips to kiss her again. But it seemed that he had understood.

“Only if you wish it. We can spend as long as you like, getting to know each other, before we... Some men would demand it, but given the circumstances of our marriage, perhaps some time would be better for both of us – almost, a period of courtship?”

It was what she had wanted – so why did she suddenly feel disappointed?

“I think that is probably best.”

He rose, and held out his hand.

“Then let me show you our suite of rooms, and you can choose the sleeping arrangements which might suit you best.”

She took his hand, twining her fingers through his, and allowed him to pull her to her feet. He lifted the candle with his other hand, and led her from the room, through the darkened hallways, and up to the next floor.

The door he finally opened let into a small parlour, with doors opening on both sides of it.

The room was beautiful, even though it was small, its walls painted a simple cream, and the chairs upholstered in a blue as dark as his eyes, which was also matched by a fine carpet on the floor.

“This is lovely!”

“I think so – I am glad that you agree. Come,” he tugged her gently to the left-hand door, “the rooms on this side are yours – there is a dressing room over there,” he had opened the door, and pointed across the room, “and beyond it is your maid’s room, which has a separate door into the servants’ hallway. And over here,” he turned her back the other way, “that door near the window opens directly into my rooms – that is why the little parlour has no window – it thereby allows this piece of wall to exist, and this door. You may, of course, redecorate this room as you wish – but I would ask that you not choose anything green, if you do so.”

Iris studied the space, which was also decorated in shades of blue and cream. It was a restful room, with a dresser, a large mirror, an escritoire, and two beautiful armchairs set before the fireplace. On the dresser, her own hairbrush and small personal belongings waited for her. The large window would, she thought, give a view to the back of the house – where there was most likely a garden.

“I have no wish to change it – it is beautiful as it is.”

Something very like relief flashed across his face.

“Now let me show you my rooms.”

He walked to the connecting door and opened it. The room they stepped into was twin to the one they had just been in, as far as colours and the position of everything, but the few items scattered about were obviously those of a gentleman.

“This room is also beautiful – you have fine taste in furnishings.”

“I had these rooms redecorated after my father’s death. Mother moved into another suite immediately, unable to face the memories that these rooms contained. Now, she spends the majority of her time at Greenleigh Park, anyway. So I had them redone to be as different as possible, and soothingly plain.” He hesitated a moment, then turned, pulling her to face him. “I leave it to you whether you choose to sleep in the bed in the other room, or to join me in this one – for just sleep, until such time as you wish more than that. I... I hope that you might join me, for the simple comfort of warmth, if nothing more.”

There was a catch in his voice, and a spark of hope caught within her – did he actually care, after all? Was that a need for her presence that she heard implied in his words? Or was that simply wishful thinking on her part?

The very idea of lying in a bed, right next to a man – and a man who had the intense effect on her that this man did – set her heart pounding. Yet they were married, and this should be an ordinary event – perhaps one day it would seem so, but at present, it seemed some strange admixture of scandalous and deliciously exciting. Could she? Could she actually do that, and... believe that they would do nothing more, at least for now?

And truly, would she actually object, if something more came of it? She was beginning to suspect that she would not...

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Leon waited, almost quivering with the uncertainty of the moment. What would she say? And if she agreed to sleep in his bed, would he be able to hold to what he had offered, and do no more than gently kiss her goodnight? He would do his damndest, for he wanted nothing between them but kindness, and hopefully love. The moment when she was told of Maggie’s existence, when she met his sister, would test that enough, without him doing anything to strain the

situation first. But, he admitted to himself, he wanted to do more, far more, than kiss her.

That she was now his wife did not make him feel entitled to demand anything of her, even though the law gave him that right – asking her to cope with the existence of his sister, and to keep the family secrets was enough to demand.

She gazed at him with those sky-blue eyes, and expressions slipped across her face in quick succession – expressions which heated and chilled him with equal rapidity. He had to believe that, for a moment, he had seen desire there. She licked her lips, and he wanted to kiss her again, to trace the shape of her mouth with his tongue, to taste her.

“Yes. I... I will join you in your bed. I think that your company will make it easier for me to adjust to a house which is strange to me, yet which is now to be my home.”

His heart lifted at her words. Perhaps he was far luckier than he deserved, and she did truly care for him, at least a little, beyond the connection which music had wrought for them. He knew so little of her, but instinct said that she was kind, that she would treat the staff well, and that there was at least a chance that her kindness might be capable of extending to Maggie too.

He would find out soon enough – they were to go to Greenleigh Park in two days’ time, once she’d had a little time to adjust.

“Thank you.”

Despite his best intentions, he cupped her cheek, and brought his lips to hers. It was the briefest, fleeting kiss, but it contained all he was beginning to feel for her, and all of his hopes for the future. They drew apart again, and her eyes glittered, as if with unshed tears.

“We will find our way, Leon...”

His name on her lips was sweet, and he smiled.

“We will. For now, go through to your room and call for your maid to help you prepare for bed. I will call for my valet, and when you return, I will already be abed.”

She gave a nod, and turned to do his bidding. He did not move until the connecting door had closed behind her.

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Iris stepped back into Leon's room, her mouth suddenly dry, and a shiver of tension bringing an ache to her bones. True to his word, he lay in the bed, attired, from what she could see, in a simple linen nightshirt. Her thoughts went to the bare skin which lay beneath that fabric, and she wondered what it would feel like to touch him, to touch the parts of a man that were normally hidden from the world by clothes.

She pushed that thought away. She would not be discovering the answer to that question tonight. Tonight, all she was going to do was sleep – for, in truth, she was exhausted, as the stress of the last few days caught up with her.

He met her eyes, and she walked across to the bed, never breaking that connection. What was he thinking? His eyes held warmth, and yet they also held... doubt?

When she reached the bedside, he folded the covers back, inviting her in. She shed her wrap, dropping it on the nearby chair, and stood for a moment, aware of her own bare skin, covered only by the fine linen of her night rail. She felt exposed, vulnerable – but not threatened.

She slipped into the bed, and pulled the covers up.

He reached out, and took her hand, lifting it gently to his lips, and pressed a kiss to the bare skin of her wrist, where the pounding of her heart was made obvious by the pulse in her veins. Then he moved their still twined hands down under the covers.

“Sleep now. Tomorrow, we can begin to find our way as husband and wife, but tonight, just know that I take pleasure in the comfort of your presence.”

“Thank you. Good night... Leon.”

It was only the second time that she had spoken his name, since the marriage ceremony – she was sure that she would get used to it... in time.

Chapter Seven

Leon stared out of the window as the carriage traversed the familiar roads. Beside him, Iris also watched the London streets give way to countryside, with far more curiosity than he had felt for years. It made him look at it anew, and he had to admit that now, as March moved towards April, it was beautiful. For years, he had regarded the passing scenery only as markers of how close he was coming to renewed pain and sadness – now, the unaffected appreciation of the early spring scenes demonstrated by his wife almost gave him hope for something different.

That was, of course, likely foolish of him. It was not possible that Maggie would have improved. Each time he had seen her over the last six months, she had been worse. There were better days, as well as worse days, but the overall trend led inexorably to her permanent decline. And once Iris saw Maggie... he would not be surprised if she refused to live in the same house. He still had not told his wife about his sister – he had tried, but had not been able to bring himself to ruin the quiet peace of the last few days. In truth, he had lacked the words to explain.

But now, in a few short miles more, the truth would be revealed. His mother would already be there, for she had come back to Greenleigh House only long enough to gather her things before leaving for Greenleigh Park yesterday – and perhaps she would have been able to prepare Maggie for what was to come.

He turned away from the window, filled with a sudden resolve. He

had to tell her now – they would be able to see the House from the top of the next rise, he had left it, utterly, to the last possible minute.

“Iris...”

She shifted on the seat, and met his eyes, hers full of concern at his sudden manner.

“Yes?”

“There is something which I have not told you.”

Her brow furrowed.

“Something...?”

“Yes. I... I did not know how to tell you. And I apologise, now, for that fact, and for what you are about to face.”

At that, a shadow of fear slid across her eyes, and he hated himself, hated the cowardice which had led him to seek his own comfort for the last few days, to pretend, for that short time, that Maggie did not exist, and that he might have a normal marriage. But there was nothing for it. He must tell Iris, and if she turned away from him, so be it.

He wanted her to stay, wanted desperately to have a true marriage with her, this woman that he had, somehow, come to love in a few short days – for that was what had happened, to his own surprise.

“Iris... I have a sister.”

She frowned again.

“But... you say that as if it is a bad thing? And... I have never seen her about in society – is she very young?”

“No, she is a few years older than I am. And her existence is not a bad thing, no – but the state of that existence, that is a different, and far more difficult, matter.”

She looked confused – as well she might, for he was doing a remarkably bad job of explaining.

“The state of her existence? I do not understand.”

He swallowed, wetting his lips, desperately searching for the words

which might convey the truth.

“She... she suffers from a malady that nothing has been able to cure. It is in part like a consumption, yet it has far broader effects – the worst of which is that, slowly, over the years, it has stolen her wits in many ways. It has changed how she sees the world – for the worse. She never came out into society, for by the time that would have been appropriate, things were too far advanced, and to do so would have wrought irreparable scandal and pain for all in the family. We have, in the main, kept her very existence a secret, for her own sake. I... must ask you to do the same, no matter what.”

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Iris stared, aghast, her mind struggling to take in the words Leon had just uttered.

At first, she felt a surge of anger, that he had not told her this, before their marriage – for there had been time, although precious little of it. But then, even though the idea of him keeping secrets from her still rankled, another thought overtook the anger.

To keep such a secret, to live with it every day - it horrified her, for the very concept of seeing a sister suffer so was unimaginable. She had spent her life surrounded by sisters who were hale and healthy, cheerful, and always there to support her – the idea that he, with only a single sister, had then been deprived of that comfort, had, instead, needed to watch his sister suffer so very much was beyond abhorrent.

How could the world be so cruel?

The thought slipped through her mind that this at least explained the strange entry in Debrett's, the mention of a sister whom no-one had ever seen or heard of. That they had succeeded in keeping his sister out of the *ton*'s awareness was remarkable – that also explained him, and his father before him, having a reputation for reclusiveness. She could not reasonably refuse the request that he had just made.

“I... of course. But can nothing be done? Physicians?”

“They have all singularly failed to do anything but make it worse. Mrs Withercombe – who was our nanny, and then became Maggie’s nurse and companion – does the best she can, and that childhood familiarity means that Maggie will generally let Mrs Withercombe guide her. But it is difficult. I do not know how Maggie will respond to your presence.”

“Surely she expected that, eventually, you would marry?”

“I... I do not think that the manner of her thinking is so rational anymore. And she is somewhat... attached... to me. My playing the pianoforte is one of the few things that truly soothes her when she is upset, and she has been used to having much of my attention.”

Iris considered those words, and what they might mean. She had never needed to spend much time with a person who was ill, never contemplated what it would be like, or how a person might behave if their illness had damaged their reasoning. What if Maggie took a dislike to her? What would she do?

“I see. I will just have to do my best then, and take things as they come. I do understand, though, that you must help your sister – if one of my sisters were dreadfully ill, I would do everything in my power to help. Perhaps she will accept my help too?”

“I suspect that she won’t - but thank you – for understanding my motivation, and for not castigating me for my ill manners in not informing you of her existence sooner.”

“In truth, I wish you had told me – but I forgive you that discourtesy. However, in future, might I ask that there be no secrets between us?”

Iris watched his face, and the fleeting passage of emotion – sadness, a deep grief, and something more, something which seemed, for a moment, to be an appreciation of her. But perhaps that was her imagination. The sound of the carriage wheels changed, from the soft muffled rumble of earth below, to the crunch of gravel. Startled, she looked out of the window again, to see, as the drive they travelled down curved, a beautiful old stone house, painted soft gold by the

afternoon light, and framed by trees dressed in spring green.

His words brought her back to him, and he smiled, aware of her reaction.

“I will do my utmost to hold to that. I have had enough of secrets in my life. The house is beautiful, isn’t it? No matter the sadness I have suffered here, I can still appreciate that beauty.”

They drew to a halt, and a footman hurried out to open the door and let down the steps.

“It is beautiful, indeed.”

He stepped out, and turned to offer her his hand. Behind them, the second carriage, bearing Belling, Lina, and all of their luggage – which was substantial, as it contained a vast amount of Iris’ personal possessions – drew to a halt.

“Belling will see that Lina is shown where everything is, and introduced to the other staff. Come, let me introduce you to the butler, housekeeper, Cook, and Mrs Withercombe. Mother is likely at the Dower House – she has chosen to live there, since father died, but Maggie could not be moved...”

His words left Iris wondering exactly why ‘Maggie could not be moved’ – was she too frail? Or was it something else?

He slipped his hand through her arm, and led her forward, but they had barely taken three steps when a green whirlwind descended upon them, tearing her away from his side.

“Do not touch him! He is my brother – mine! Who are you to presume so!”

So – not too frail to move, then. Not truly strong though, for the effort which had been exerted to thrust Iris away from Leon had left the girl shaking, breathless, and clinging to Leon for support. She was tall, and very thin – quite gaunt in fact. Her skin was excessively pale, and very smooth where it was not marred with sores, and her hair, whilst thin and limp, was the same rich colour as Leon’s. The contrast of its darkness made her skin seem even paler. She was dressed completely in green, with a green bow tying back her hair. Her eyes

were blue, but a faded shade, almost grey, like a drab winter sky.

Leon's voice was gentle as he spoke.

"Maggie, this is Iris. Iris is my wife – we were married a few days ago, in London. She will be living here with me, now."

The girl whirled to face him, wobbling on her feet as she did so.

"NO! She cannot! This is our home, and no interlopers are welcome. Send her away!"

Iris swallowed. This was, it seemed, going to be harder than she had thought. At that moment, Lady Greenleigh hurried up to them, closely followed by a grey-haired woman with a kind face who looked, Iris thought, to be exhausted. This must, she deduced, be Mrs Withercombe. Lady Greenleigh went to Maggie and gently took her hand.

"Maggie dear, you mustn't say such things. Iris will be staying – she is Leon's wife – he can't just send her away, and nor should he. You will have to be a good girl, and share your home with her."

Maggie glowered at her mother, and Iris could see that co-operation was unlikely.

"I will not!"

"Maggie, you have no choice – unless you wish to come to live in the Dower House with me?"

Maggie flinched, as if the words had been a physical blow.

"No! I can't... not there... It's... It's not green..."

Iris considered this strange proclamation. Maggie wore only green clothes – was there more to that than just her choice of attire for the day? And what did she mean by those words with respect to the Dower House?

"Then you must cope with Iris being here."

Maggie lifted her chin, looking for all the world like a slightly demented five-year-old who had been denied their favourite treat. It was a shocking thing to see on a woman of twenty-five or so. Mrs

Withercombe stepped past Iris, with a quietly whispered, "I'm sorry, my Lady," and went to help Lady Greenleigh lead Maggie into the house.

Silence fell for a moment, then footsteps on the gravel made Iris turn. Lina approached, looking white with shock.

"My Lady... what will you do?"

Iris wanted to run away, to hide from the terrible revelations of the day – but she could not. And, truth to tell, the situation had just invoked her innate stubbornness. She would not be forced away from her rightful place.

"Go on as I had intended to, Lina, and make this my home. Now please continue – make sure that all of the luggage is taken to the right place, and that we have all that we need. I am sure that Belling can help you find the Housekeeper if anything more is needed. I will see you later – when I come up to change."

Lina straightened her back, obviously braced by the fact that Iris appeared unafraid.

"Yes, my Lady."

She turned back to Belling, who stood waiting with a small cluster of footmen near him, each carrying a trunk. Iris released the breath she had been holding.

"That was well done, my dear. And thank you for your forbearance. That was far from the manner in which I had hoped to introduce you to my sister, but now it is done. I apologise for her actions, and her words. She does not truly see the world sensibly anymore."

"I can see that her... condition... is rather worse than I expected from your description. But... why was she out here?"

"In spring and summer, when the leaves on the trees are green, we can get her to come outside, and walk in the gardens. She is better when she does, she seems stronger in the days when she goes outside regularly, even if she cannot walk any great distance."

Iris nodded, her mind catching on the word green, again. Why did green matter? She did not understand, and she had the feeling that the coming days would bring many things which seemed beyond her comprehension, at least at first.

“I see. Where are they taking her?”

“To her rooms – the upper floor of the west wing is all Maggie’s domain. They will get her settled, and Mrs Withercombe will see if she can get Maggie to eat. Then, after we have dinner, if Maggie is still awake, I will need to go up and play for her, to lull her into rest. There is a small parlour up there, with a pianoforte just for that purpose.”

“So... I will not have your company? Will your mother...?”

“Mother will go back to the Dower House, immediately after dinner. I am afraid that I will need to leave you alone, until we get Maggie to sleep.”

Iris took a very deep breath, and for the first time, felt the prick of tears threatening. She would not allow this to affect her so – that would be to let Maggie win. But she had never felt so alone in her life. She could not deny poor crazed Maggie her brother’s company, yet she felt abandoned by him, nonetheless. She would manage, and late tonight, perhaps they could talk, and she could learn more of this strange house that was now her home.

“I see. I will retire to our rooms after dinner, then and wait for you.”

“Thank you.”

He lifted her hand, and pressed a kiss to it, then led her into the house, where a silent footman waited, holding the door for them.

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Leon could feel his heart breaking, with every moment. Iris was being determined, and strong, but he could see how much Maggie’s words and actions had hurt her. He had been mad to think that this

could work, that he could have a true marriage, while Maggie still walked this earth. Now, having been foolish enough to allow Iris to stay in that music room with him, at Lady Gillieston's, foolish enough to allow his musical connection to her to carry him along into marriage, and to this moment, the harsh truth had become obvious – despite the fact that he had come to admire her, to love her, he had to expect that, after today, she would despise him for what he had done to her.

He pressed a kiss to her hand, then led her into the house. Through the introductions to the staff, she carried herself magnificently, as if the scene on the forecourt had never happened - pride rose within him then, and respect for her courage. Dinner was strained, and they spoke little – he suspected that his mother was beginning to wonder if him marrying had really been the right thing, no matter how much she had previously advocated for it.

As he went up to play for Maggie, he wondered if he would ever be allowed untrammelled happiness.

Chapter Eight

The faint distant sound of music had died away some minutes ago, and Iris sat, attired in her nightrail and wrap, her book forgotten in her lap, the candle beside her near guttered out, and the glow of the fire gilding everything around her with a red gold burnish. The small parlour she sat in adjoined their suite of rooms – a different configuration than the rooms in the Townhouse, but with just as much private space and convenience. It was also simply decorated in blue and cream, but this room had a window, and deep burgundy curtains closed out the night.

She listened to the sounds of this house, so different from any house she had ever lived in – the soft creaking of floorboards in the hallway the only indication that someone approached. For a moment, fear assailed her, then she pushed that aside. Surely, it was Leon, coming to their rooms now that Maggie slept and he had been released from playing.

But the shiver of disquiet remained.

She turned sharply as the door opened, then sank back in relief.

It was Leon. He closed the door behind him, and clipped the lock into place. Curious, she watched. This house had the most modern locks she had ever seen, and she wondered why. And why he locked the door – did he think that someone might attempt to enter, uninvited?

That thought brought another shiver of disquiet.

“I thought that you might have gone to your rest by now. It took far longer than usual to soothe Maggie into sleep tonight.”

He walked across to her as he spoke, and settled onto the couch beside her. She set the book down on the small side table, and met his eyes.

“I wanted to talk with you, to understand more of Maggie, and what I can reasonably expect to happen over the coming weeks. I would hope to avoid scenes like that which we suffered on the forecourt today, if I may.”

He took her hands in his, and she shivered again, but this time, from pleasure, feeling heat spread through her at his touch. Would he kiss her again?

“I wish that I had spoken to you of this when we were in London. I apologise again for my selfishness in not doing so. I... I just wanted that few days of my life to be separate from all of this...”

“Now that I have met Maggie, I believe that I can understand that desire. But... tell me more – how did she come to be like this? When did it start?”

“Truthfully, none of us are sure. When I was very small, Maggie seemed normal – to me, at least. She was always a little intense, but not irrational. We played together, as children do, and she learnt music with me. But it was never easy for her.”

“Did she play the pianoforte?”

“Only a little, yet she loved to share it with me. For a while, at least. She soon decided that I played so well, she was better just to listen to me. I only really began to see that something was not right when I was about ten years old, and she twelve. Before that, she had clear preferences for things – like the colour of her clothes – but was amenable to variety. At twelve, she became less tractable, and more obsessed with certain things. My father allowed it, spoiling her, for he had always been easily swayed by her smiles. But those obsessions grew, and her health faded away. She became progressively more frail, suffering congestion of the lungs each winter, and being easily

prone to sores on her hands and arms. The only thing that settled her, even then, was her own rooms, filled with her own things – which became, over time, utterly dominated by the colour green. I have quite come to hate the colour green.”

“But... the irrationality... the... madness?”

“The madness. Yes, that is the correct word, sadly. That came slowly too. Over a number of years, she was less and less sensible, less and less willing to leave her rooms for any length of time, and more prone to fits of temper. When father spoke of possibly sending me away to school. She became inconsolable – so much so that it was decided to simply arrange tutors for me. When it came the time that we should have been preparing for her coming out, we were, instead, planning how best to keep her away from society, and protect her. By then, her health was very fragile. The times when Father took me to London, to meet my peers and to prepare me for the day when I would inherit, we only ever stayed away a few days before coming back here, or Maggie would become impossible to manage.”

“Then this last week...?”

“Made her quite distraught, and has no doubt left Mrs Withercombe utterly exhausted.”

“Is there no hope of improvement?”

“I do not think so. We have consulted the best physicians, but they all shook their heads and wanted to bleed her – which would only weaken her further. None could offer an explanation of the illness, or any real suggestions which might promote healing. So we have done our best, by observing the times that she is better, and the times that she is worse, and drawing our own conclusions. All we have been able to determine is that, if we can get her to walk outside in the grounds, it is better, and if we can get her to eat more meat, she is strengthened – but she will not walk outside in autumn or winter, and she barely eats, usually refusing all but green vegetables.”

“I have never heard of such a condition before.”

“Neither had we, nor have we any reports of others suffering in a

manner exactly like this.” He tightened his fingers on Iris’ hands, and swallowed, pain shining in his eyes. “But the thing that worries me most of all is not the effect of the madness on her, terrible though it is, but the fact that the madness exists at all. I ask myself, over and over again – what if the madness is due to a corruption of the blood, the kind of thing that can pass from one generation to the next? What if a child of mine might be so afflicted?”

He looked stricken, and Iris felt equally so for a moment, before common sense asserted itself.

“Leon... in families where such things have passed from one generation to the next, there has usually been sign of it in multiple people, and in the record books. Unless that is true in your family, it seems very unlikely that it could afflict a child of yours.”

“But what if it does? How can we have children, if such a threat hangs over them?”

Iris swallowed, feeling shaken, but still shook her head.

“I do not know what it is that has done this to Maggie, but I cannot believe it a contamination of the blood. There must be another explanation of it. If no other in your family history has suffered so, then I am willing to think it unlikely that another will in the future. At this point, the history of it does not matter – what matters is now – and the fact that Maggie hates me and wants me gone. Yet she is your sister, and I know that you will not abandon her, as I would not abandon a sister of mine. I do not know how those things can be resolved in a manner that can let me live in this house with you.”

He looked at her, and for a moment, his feelings were clear on his face – he looked utterly hurt, as if she had thrust a knife into his heart. Then he turned his eyes away from her, and went to release her hands.

“I suspected that you would feel so. I cannot ask you to stay...”

“No! That is not what I meant. I do not want to leave you – far from it. I want to stay, I want to build a life with you – I am simply saying that, at this moment, I do not know how we will manage to do

that.”

He stopped, mid movement, and she curled her fingers around his, pulling him back towards her. He met her eyes again, and what she saw there took her breath away. There was pure, naked desire, deep relief, and complete confusion, all entangled. It seemed that the desire won, for without another word, he pulled her to him, slipping an arm around her, and lifting the other to cradle the back of her neck as he brought his lips to hers. She went into the kiss willingly, her heart racing.

She was drowning in that kiss, pleasure flooding her veins as his tongue teased and explored, and she, greatly daring, explored him in return. Minutes passed, and nothing else mattered but the connection between them. This was how it was supposed to be – their bodies cleaving to each other, wanting to meld physically, as they did so easily musically.

When they drew apart a little, both breathing hard, Iris knew that she wanted more – more kisses, and more than kisses. Leon regarded her with something like wonder.

“We will find a way, I promise. I do not yet know what that way might be, but I will not let my sister destroy what we have between us.”

“I... I would like to explore more of what we have. More of... the physical...”

She felt her cheeks redden as she said it, but she wanted it said. He drew her closer again, and pressed a kiss to her forehead, then a trail of soft kisses down her face, until he found her lips. She parted them, and his tongue slid through that gap, caressing, exploring. She quivered. His hands caressed her neck, her back, her sides, and every touch was a trail of exquisite fire.

But, like everything where they were concerned, it seemed, the moment was shattered.

A pounding came on the door, accompanied by a high-pitched shouting. They jerked apart, startled to their feet, and for a moment

Iris clung to him in fear. Then the words in the shouting became clear to her, and sense regained control of her mind. She pushed away a little, and stood straighter.

“Leon, let me in! Is that witch in there with you? Make her leave. She doesn’t belong here. Leon....”

Maggie.

The words tumbled from her, an ever-increasing tirade, damning Iris as a witch and worse. Any desire that Iris had felt left her, as sharply as if she had been doused with freezing water. Even this, a supposed moment of quiet intimacy between them, in their own rooms, had been destroyed by Maggie's madness.

How could they ever risk such moments, when this could happen?

Leon gently lifted his hands from her, and went to the door. He did not open it, or move to unlock it, he simply spoke.

“Maggie, be calm. It is night, and time for you to rest. The whereabouts of my wife is not your concern. I will speak with you in the morning, but now, you must return to your bed.”

“I won’t – not until I know that she’s gone. Throw her out into the night. Do it for me, brother. She does not belong here, she is not family.”

“I will not. She is family, for I have married her. Now go to bed.”

At that point, hurried footsteps came along the hall, and Mrs Withercombe’s voice joined the conversation.

“Maggie dear, he’s right – you must come to bed now. Tomorrow is soon enough to talk about how you feel, once you are properly rested.”

“I don’t want to sleep!”

Maggie sounded, again, like a small child – the tiredness was in her voice, but her words were all denial. Mrs Withercombe spoke to her for some minutes, and finally convinced her, once Leon had promised to spend some time with her in the morning, to allow herself to be led away to bed.

They stood there in silence, until all sound of footsteps had faded away. Then Leon turned back to face Iris.

“Leon, is that why you locked the door? Because you thought that something like that might happen?”

“Yes. I am sorry. I had hoped...”

“I am beginning to think that hope is unwise. Much though I would like to continue from where we were when the pounding on the door began, I do not think that I could. I am not sure that I will ever be able to relax enough to be intimate when we are in the same house as Maggie.”

Leon sighed, and she could see the misery in him, but after a moment he simply nodded.

“You are wiser than I. Let us, then, content ourselves with the solace of music, until such time as we can take a few days in London, alone. And let us try to get Maggie to accept you, at least a little.”

Iris went to him then, and rose on her toes to press her lips to his for a moment, then stepped back.

“We had best sleep now, if we are to be fit to deal with the morning.”

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Days passed, and the time of mourning for the King ended. Outside as Spring moved towards summer, the gardens blossomed, the trees attained full leaf, and the world was generally beautiful.

Had it not been for Maggie, and her impact on the entire household, Iris would have been happy. Wistfully, she thought of her family in London, where no doubt her mother was bringing the force of her expectations to bear on Thorne. With all of the girls married, he would no longer be able to escape their mother’s focus on seeing all of her children well matched.

The gardens and greenhouses at Elbury House would also all be in

bloom, and perhaps some of the rarer tropical plants might have been coaxed into flower for the first time. But she would not see them. After a long discussion with Leon, they had agreed that before they could go to London, before they could have time to themselves, it was critical that Maggie be convinced to accept Iris.

That was, unfortunately, a project which had so far been almost completely unsuccessful.

Faced with that fact, they found shared solace in music, and persisted, with his mother's, and Mrs Withercombe's, help. That very morning, when they had come down to break their fast, Maggie had taken a knife from the table, and flung it at Iris, shouting 'go away, witch'. Iris had flinched aside just in time, and the knife had gone on to quiver in the heart of a pheasant in the painting which graced the breakfast room wall. Such moments were becoming more common, not less.

At this moment, she sat in the music room with Leon, the sound of their playing fading away into silence as they both looked out through the floor to ceiling windows at the gardens below. Down there, Maggie could be seen, walking about, a small basket on her arm, as she randomly picked flowers and small branches of greenery. Mrs Withercombe trailed her, watchful as always.

"When she is out there, like that, she looks so quiet, so innocent of all strong emotions."

Leon twined his fingers with hers, and sighed at her words.

"Would that it were so. But it is not. No matter how we try, nothing seems to bring her any closer to accepting you. Although... yesterday, when I left you here, playing, and stepped out to order a tea tray for us, I found her in the hallway. She looked at me as if I must be a ghost, her eyes round, and her gaze flicking back towards the room behind me. I suspect that it was the first time she had realised that you also played the pianoforte. She stood like that for a moment, listening, then turned and hurried away, back up to her rooms. But perhaps that way lies hope..."

Iris considered what he had said, her eyes still following Maggie in the gardens below. Was there hope that way? Was music the path to Maggie?

“Should we... should I...?”

“I think so. I think that, perhaps, you should come up to her rooms with me tonight, and play for her, as I normally do. If she will accept the soothing of music from you, as well as from me, then that will be a very good beginning.”

“Let us try that, then, for I confess that I do not know what else we might attempt.”

Chapter Nine

Leon felt more trapped than he ever had before. It was his own fault – he had allowed impulse to overrule sense, and brought about the series of events which saw him now married. But, just as he had always feared would happen if he took a wife, Maggie's rejection of Iris was intractable. There seemed nothing he could do to change that, nothing he could do to allow them to have even the faintest shadow of a true marriage – and he wanted a true marriage.

He had discovered that he loved his wife – impossibly, utterly, desperately. And the more that circumstances forced them to behave as little more than friends, the deeper that love became, and the greater his desperation. He had not professed that love to her, not in so many words, for he found himself afraid that, if he did, he would discover that her feelings for him were not of equal strength. He was quite certain that Iris cared for him – but did she love him?

He did not know.

As Maggie's health faded, so the ferocity of her madness seemed to grow – there were more outbursts of temper, more wild imaginings, and wild accusations. Music remained the only thing which could soothe her for any length of time, and he was grateful that he had that ability – and grateful also that he could share music with Iris, for that gave him music which was not tainted by the association with Maggie's illness.

Now, as he walked along the upper hall with Iris by his side, his admiration for her grew yet again. He could tell that she was worried,

yet she had chosen to come with him, to play for Maggie. Her quiet courage and determination impressed him at every turn. Her voice, when she spoke, was barely a whisper, and a little shaky.

“I pray that Maggie accepts me, that she allows me to play for her, with you. But after this afternoon... I am doubtful.”

Leon wanted to pull Iris into his arms, to kiss her, to somehow protect her from all of this – yet what could he do? Maggie was his sister.

“Mrs Withercombe will be more watchful, after that. I did not expect Maggie to attack you so.”

“Did she truly intend me to fall down the stairs, Leon? Or did she simply push at me because I was there, and she wants me to go away?”

“I do not know. But you did not fall, thank the good Lord.”

She nodded, and they went on in silence for the last few steps to the door to Maggie’s rooms. In his mind, though, he raged at himself, afraid – had Maggie meant it? Would his sister truly try to harm his wife to such a degree? Was Iris’ life in danger, if they stayed here? He could not answer the questions, but their very existence terrified him. How could he protect both his wife, and his sister?

They tapped at the door to the small parlour, and Mrs Withercombe admitted them. The doors between the bedchamber and the parlour were closed.

Mrs Withercombe leant close and whispered to them.

“I thought it best to leave the doors shut until you start playing, my Lady, that way she’ll hear the music before she has a chance to get upset.”

“Very wise.”

As Mrs Withercombe closed the outer door, Maggie called from the bedchamber.

“Mrs Withercombe, is that Leon? Open the doors!”

Leon led Iris forward and settled her on the bench, standing behind

her, with his hand on her shoulder. She began to play, a piece which he had suggested as one that Maggie liked. After a few bars, Mrs Withercombe went and opened the double doors to the bedchamber. Leon met Maggie's eyes, where she sat in her bed, as if daring her to complain.

What he saw there was shock, and defiance. Maggie opened her mouth, and Leon shook his head.

“What...?”

He shook his head again, harder, and Maggie actually lapsed back into silence, listening, watching Iris play. Leon prayed more intensely than he ever had before in his life, in that moment, begging God to help Maggie see that Iris was no threat.

Iris tensed ever so slightly under his hand, but kept playing, a smooth, uninterrupted flow of music filling the room. Maggie slumped back onto her pillows, and watched, eyes wide, as if debating whether she should stay there or leap up and push Iris away.

It took two hours, but eventually, Maggie slumped into sleep, not having spoken again. Mrs Withercombe slipped in to close the windows and the drapes, and to make sure that Maggie truly slept, before coming back to them and closing the doors between the bedchamber and the parlour. She gave him a nod, confirming that all was well.

“Iris...” the music flowed on, and he squeezed her shoulder gently, “you can stop playing now.”

The notes died away, and she looked up at him, as if waking from a dream. Then her eyes cleared, and she gave him a tremulous smile. He helped her to her feet, nodded to Mrs Withercombe, then led Iris from the room. Neither of them spoke until they stood in their own suite, with the door to the hall locked behind them.

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Iris discovered that she was shaking. Whilst she had played, she

had allowed the music to claim her, and had intentionally blocked out all awareness of anything else. But now, as the lock of their door clicked home, and Leon came to her, she felt unsteady on her feet. He pulled her into his arms, simply cradling her against him, and pressed a soft kiss to her forehead.

“Thank you, Iris. That went far better than I had any right to expect.”

She looked up at him then, and smiled.

“How do you do it? My hands ache, from playing that long with no break at all!”

“I have had rather a lot of practice.”

“I suspect that I am about to get a lot of practice too – for that is the only way to take advantage of this beginning, isn’t it? For me to play for her on other nights?”

“Yes, I believe so. That is, after all, the first time she has been in the same room with you, without either a verbal or physical attack. And I would prefer that to be the usual way of things, rather than the exception. Her health may be waning, yet when she is agitated, she seems to develop a kind of hysterical strength – I would not have her hurt you, or herself.”

Iris shuddered, despite her best effort not to.

“I would also prefer that neither of us be harmed. Leon... that room – the one glance I had into her bedchamber, all I could see was green. I know that you said that she was obsessed with the colour, but truly, until that moment, I had not fully understood the scale of that obsession.”

“It is absolute. It is why she spends so little time in the rest of the house – I, and my father before me, refused to make the entire house green for her. Her own chambers are one thing, but the entire house – no. Equally, she will not go to live in the Dower House with Mother, for that is not green either, and Mother refused to make it so. In truth, I think that all of us – the staff included, have seen enough of green to last a lifetime.”

Iris shuddered again, unable to imagine what it would be like to be so utterly fixated on one thing.

“I am very glad, then, that I own no green gowns. The colour has never suited me.”

“I am also most grateful for that fact. I have no wish to be the kind of husband who is dictatorial, but green might have made me so.”

Iris regarded him, wondering what kind of husband he truly wished to be to her – she knew that he cared for her, even that he seemed to desire her – but could he love her? Could they reach that point? She knew that she loved him, that she had from the start, but she had never told him so, was, indeed, afraid to do so, lest his response disappoint her. She would rather have hope, than know for certain that she would never have love.

Not, she thought with a twist of dark humour, that there was any chance to find out – not whilst they resided in the same house as Maggie. So any internal debate she might have on the matter was rather pointless.

“Then I am doubly glad that it is not an issue. Might... might we sleep now? Today has been very tiring, and I suspect that the days to come will be no better.”

“Sadly, I agree – although, in a few weeks’ time, I must go to London – I have been away from Parliament for too long, and there are matters which need my attention. Perhaps, if you come with me, we might get a few days respite? I cannot leave Mother and Mrs Withercombe to cope alone for too long, but a few days, perhaps even a week, should be possible.”

“Then I will look forward to that time.”

Leon bent and kissed her – a soft kiss which quickly became more, but they soon broke apart, neither trusting that there would not come a pounding on the door at any time. They did not say it, but Iris knew it was there – a threat which hung over her, her marriage, and her hope of love – a threat which would not end, until the day that Maggie died – which could be years.

Over the next few weeks, it became obvious to Iris that not only was the approach of having her play to soothe Maggie to sleep doing nothing to improve things at other times, but that Maggie was more cunning than she had at first seemed. When Leon's mother was there, each afternoon and for dinner, Maggie regarded Iris with venomous looks, but did nothing untoward. Lady Greenleigh was, apparently, taken in by this, and believed that the situation was improving. Iris could not bring herself to disabuse her of this notion – the poor woman had enough to bear, with having spent most of her adult life coping with Maggie already.

But when Lady Greenleigh was not there, Maggie took every opportunity she could to disrupt Iris' days, and to cause her physical harm if possible. It might be such simple things as attempting to trip her, or as overwhelming as the day when Maggie leapt upon Iris from the shadows under the stairs, and beat at her with tight fists, all the while screaming her hatred.

The staff assisted where they could, and Mrs Withercombe drove herself to distraction, attempting to prevent such incidents, but nonetheless, Maggie managed to find – or make - opportunities to vent her feelings on Iris almost every day. Some, Leon was aware of, but others, which occurred when he was not present, she could not bring herself to tell him of. He already bore so much, and seemed to feel a weight of guilt for bringing her into this situation in the first place, and she would not make that burden heavier.

The result of it all was that Iris became increasingly tired, increasingly scared, and the house seemed more oppressive every day, as if threat were bound into its very walls. She started at shadows, and flinched at sudden sounds. The only places which felt even slightly safe were their bedchambers, and the downstairs music room which she shared with Leon.

She was afraid – she could no longer deny it. She felt certain that Maggie intended her harm – that if the girl could not drive her away,

then she would attempt to hurt her – perhaps even to kill her. There was cunning in that mind, but no rationality, no common human decency remained. Realising that did nothing to help – for she could not ask Leon to abandon his sister, and all she had tried had failed, with respect to changing Maggie’s attitude.

Last week, Maggie had surprised Iris in the library, and when Iris stepped back from her in shock, Maggie had snatched up a pen knife which had been left on the escritoire near the window, and lunged at Iris with it. Iris had been frozen, unable to move, and had only been saved by the fact that Maggie’s frailty meant that she was unbalanced, which caused her to trip on the edge of the carpet and fall. The knife had spun free from her hand, and slid across the floor to end under a cupboard in one corner.

“Witch! You made me fall. Leave – you do not belong here. Leave, or I will make you leave.”

The words had been hissed, cold and sharp, even as Maggie had scrambled back to her feet, and staggered, half-running, from the room. Iris had stayed frozen, shaking, for some minutes, before she had quietly retrieved the knife, and returned it to its place in the escritoire drawer.

Then, this afternoon, Maggie had come upon Iris as Iris went up the stairs, and Maggie came down. At the point where they should pass each other, Maggie had reached out and tugged upon Iris’ skirt, hard, so that Iris twisted, and nearly fell down the stairs. Only her proximity to the banister saved her, for she grasped it even as she slipped, and landed sitting on the steps instead. Maggie had wobbled, close to falling herself, but then hurried on, as if nothing had happened.

Iris was sure that, had she truly fallen, Maggie would have done nothing to save or help her.

Leon knew nothing of it, for he was out, riding around the estate to check on the tenant farmers. Now, she waited in the music room, hoping for his rapid return, refusing to allow her fear to send her upstairs to lock herself into their rooms, although that was what she

most wished to do.

She could not tell him – could not say ‘your sister tries to kill me’, despite the terrifying fact that she had come to believe that to be true. What would he think – after all, he would rightly ask why she had not told him sooner. Or, even worse, he would regard her as hysterical – for who would expect a frail invalid of unsound mind to have the ability to attempt to kill?

She shivered, very glad that the promised trip to London was to happen next week. Surely, she could manage to avoid Maggie’s attempts on her person until then? Perhaps, safe in London, she might find the courage to tell Leon all of what had happened. Perhaps, in London, they might have the chance to actually be as husband and wife?

She was no longer sure what she wanted, except to be safe.

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Leon rode along the lane which would take him back to his stables. In the distance, he could see Maggie’s green attired figure in the gardens, with Mrs Withercombe trailing her. That was good – for if Maggie was outside, then she was not making Iris’ life a misery.

It was a terrible thing to have to acknowledge, but he could no longer deny it to himself – his sister did not just dislike his wife intensely, she actively sought to harm Iris. He was torn, trapped by his duty twice over, with a need to protect and care for both women. And he did not know how to achieve that.

Maggie became steadily more frail, yet as her body’s strength waned, so her determination to have her way in everything grew. He was afraid of what she might do. Afraid that, at the critical juncture, he would not be there to protect Iris, and to protect Maggie from her own actions.

He had not even discussed it with Iris – and he suspected that she had not told him of everything that Maggie had done - but, having

avoided the conversation thus far, he did not know how to begin. He could not simply say 'I think that my sister is trying to harm you'.

He passed his horse to a groom when he reached the stables, and set off to the house, glad beyond measure that they were to go to London next week. Perhaps there, with only Iris, he might manage to speak of it, and between them, they might discover a solution.

Chapter Ten

They had been in London for three days now, and it still felt like an impossible dream. Last night, they had gone to a Ball at Merryfield House, and she had, for the first time, danced with Leon simply for the joy of it, surrounded by her friends and family, and secure in the knowledge that Maggie was many miles away at Greenleigh Park.

When they had returned to Greenleigh House, she had been positively intoxicated still, just by the feeling of it all. Exhausted, she had allowed Lina to ready her for bed, but then, with a courage fuelled by the looming threat of their return to Greenleigh Park, she had gone to Leon and reached for him. He had taken her into his arms and kissed her – a heady kiss full of passion and promise, which stirred every part of her. But then, he had gently stepped back.

“Iris, much though I would wish to kiss you – and more – forever, we must sleep – it is near 4 in the morning, and we have promised to visit one of your sisters tomorrow.”

Iris had done her best impression of a pouting child, and he had laughed, kissing her again, more softly this time, until she relented and kissed him back.

“Very well. But Leon... I want you to know... you said that we would do nothing more than kisses, until I was ready...”

“Yes?”

His voice was deeper than usual when he said that one word, and what she had seen in his eyes gave her hope for the future.

“I think that I am ready. I want... I want to at least begin to explore what ‘more than kisses’ would be like, between us – and I want to do so this week, while we are here, and I feel...” she hesitated, unwilling to say the word ‘safe’ although it almost palpably hung between them, “...sure that we won’t be interrupted.”

Her heart had pounded in her chest, and she had waited for his response, feeling strange, and wanton, even knowing that such things should be normal between husband and wife. He had not rejected her request, as she had feared he might, but had, instead, groaned softly before kissing her again, very deeply.

The words he had spoken when they finally drew apart, breathing hard, would stay with her forever.

“Iris, if that is what you wish, I will be more than happy to do as you ask – for you are beautiful, and I have desired you from the first moment that I saw you. But, for me at least, once we take that step, every day will be torture, for when we return to Greenleigh Park, I will wish to continue – and to resist that, when you stand before me, temptation incarnate, will be near impossible.”

Those words had made her shiver, as fire and ice ran through her veins. To be so desired....

It was more than she had hoped for, that raw honesty in his voice, that heat in his eyes, and she had licked her lips, unsure what to say in response.

He had cupped her cheek, and smiled wryly before speaking again.

“But no matter how much we may both desire it, now is not the right time – your first time should be a thing of joy, a time when you have my full attention – and right now we are both exhausted. Let us hold this intent until tomorrow night, and make sure that we retire early then...”

She had sighed, turning her head to place a kiss into his palm, then nodded.

“You are right, Leon, we should sleep.”

Without further words, he had led her to the bed and, once they

lay beneath the covers, had curled his body around hers, and held her as they drifted into sleep.

Now, as she regarded him across the breakfast table, the memory of it brought heat to her core. He smiled at her – a conspiratorial smile, as if he knew what she was thinking, and she felt a blush colour her cheeks.

What might the day ahead bring?

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Leon looked up from his plate to see Iris watching him. He smiled, remembering her words of the night before, remembering the feel of her, lying beside him in the bed.

She would tempt a saint.

It still astounded him that she was his wife, and his determination to have a true marriage with her had redoubled in the last few days, as they had simply spent time with each other, and with some of her family. He liked her family, unreservedly – which was a relief – one intense dislike was enough to deal with, and Maggie's dislike of Iris was on a scale beyond anything he ever wished to have to deal with again.

“Ah... I know that we have promised to visit your sister Camellia late this afternoon, but our day has just become somewhat more complicated. A message arrived while you were dressing, from my grandmother.”

“Lady Neelsham?”

“Yes – she asks that we call on her at two today. And while it is phrased as asking, I know that she will regard it as a summons, and expect our compliance.”

Iris paused, her expression uncertain for a moment, then she straightened her shoulders.

“I suppose then, that we must comply. Lady Neelsham is redoubtable, and I would not wish to have her dislike me – any more

than she probably already does.”

Leon laughed, and Iris looked rather shocked at his response.

“I would not think that, if I were you. I rather suspect that she likes you. I seem to remember her being impressed by your courage in the midst of our ‘moment of compromise’. She does an excellent impression of ferocity, but underneath it, I have always found her to be of a far kinder character.”

“If that is how she shows her liking, then I would not wish to see her genuinely angry...”

He laughed again.

“You will manage well enough, regardless – for she was correct in her assessment of your courage.”

She stilled, setting down her coffee cup carefully, and regarded him, those sky-blue eyes wide.

“You... you think that I have courage?”

“Of course I do, Iris. You stood up to my grandmother from the start, you face Maggie’s aggression and dislike with calm determination, and you do not complain. Most women would have fainted away with a fit of the vapours, and then, upon being revived, told me that they were leaving.”

She blinked, as if his words startled her.

“Leon! I would never leave you! And I do not faint. Nor do any of my sisters – although we may have been seen to wobble a little, occasionally.”

His heart soared – he had not been seeking such a declaration from her, and her instantaneous rebuttal of the idea of leaving him filled him with warmth, with hope. She had said those words in a completely unstudied manner, as simply a declaration of fact. If she felt so strongly... was there hope that she might come to truly love him?

Despite Leon's faith in her courage, the sight of Lady Neelsham's imposing home made her feel quite queasy. It was, of course, in the best neighbourhood.

The nearby homes were equally impressive, and despite having grown up living in just such a street, Iris felt somehow made small. They stepped down from the carriage, and soon stood on the doorstep.

Leon rapped the knocker firmly against the black painted door, and the echo of the sound came back to them, faintly, accompanied by footsteps. Iris stood straighter and made sure that her best socially polite smile graced her face.

The door opened, and a grey-haired butler regarded them seriously for a moment, before breaking into a broad smile.

"Lord Greenleigh! It is a pleasure to see you again. Please, do come in – Lady Neelsham is in the large parlour." He led them up the stairs, and to the door of a room which must, from its position, look out over the square in front of the house. He tapped on the door, and entered when bidden. "Lord and Lady Greenleigh, my Lady."

Then he stepped aside, and Leon led her through that door.

For a moment, she was stunned by the beauty of the room she now stood in. Double glass doors stood open onto a balcony, and she could see the gardens in the Square laid out below. Tall windows either side of those doors let in yet more light, and the entire room was decorated in tones of gold and cream. It was like being in a pool of sunlight.

Then Leon moved her forward, and her eyes came to focus on Lady Neelsham, who had risen from her chair to greet them. In that instant, Iris was acutely aware that she was being studied by the older woman.

"I can see that you like my parlour. Good, I would be worried about your sensibilities if you didn't."

"Grandmother. It's good to see you again."

Lady Neelsham was still watching Iris, who swallowed, and chose to approach this as improperly as Lady Neelsham just had.

"Yes, Lady Neelsham, I very much like your parlour. Thank you for

inviting us to call on you.”

Beside her, Leon made the strangest small sound, almost as if he had stifled a laugh. Lady Neelsham continued to study her, as if expecting her to look away, or display some sign of nervousness. Iris, provoked to stubbornness by that look, held perfectly still, meeting the Lady’s eyes, and waited.

After an interminable silence, Lady Neelsham laughed, looking at Leon for a moment.

“She’ll do, Leon.” She turned back to Iris. “I did wonder if that flash of courage when we caught you two together at Lady Gillieston’s was truly in your character, or an aberration. It would appear that you are consistent. I sent for tea the moment that I saw your carriage approaching around the Square – it should be here in a moment. Please do sit.”

Lady Neelsham waved them to the couch which was placed opposite her chair, and Leon led Iris to it. She dropped to sit on it as elegantly as she could, given that her legs were near giving out beneath her from the stress of the moment. As she did, there came a tap at the door, and a maid brought in a large tea tray, which she set down on the table between them and Lady Neelsham.

All conversation stopped whilst the maid left and Lady Neelsham poured the tea, as they each selected cakes from the heaped platter before them. Only once tea had been sipped, and Iris had tasted the cakes – flavoured with vanilla and cinnamon, and quite delicious – did Lady Neelsham speak again.

This time, it was Leon that she gazed at, and Iris had the feeling that Lady Neelsham expected him to be unhappy with her next words.

“And is your mad sister any better? Or is that too much to hope for?”

Iris felt Leon stiffen, and she knew that he did not like Maggie to be spoken of so disparagingly. Then she felt him sag a little out of that stiffness, as a sigh escaped him.

“That is too much to hope for. She becomes more frail every day,

and her mental state varies, but I could not describe any of it as truly ‘better’ in any way.”

Lady Neelsham gave a sharp nod, and turned her eyes to Iris.

“And you, my girl, how do you cope with the mad one? Does she accept you?”

Before she could stop herself, Iris gave a sharp, mirthless laugh.

“She does not accept me, and makes that abundantly clear at every turn. I have tried to encourage her towards at least bare tolerance, but even that seems impossible. I cope, because I am Leon’s wife, and she is his sister. If it were one of my sisters so stricken, I would not abandon her – I cannot expect him to abandon his sister. Nor would I abandon him – I knew well what I did when I married him, even if no one warned me of Maggie’s plight at the time. But, if we are to be brutally honest, as it seems you desire, then I will most freely admit that it is not easy.”

She stopped, wondering if she had just gone entirely too far – at Lady Neelsham’s question, all of her frustration with the situation had risen up within her, driving her to speak far more bluntly than she should have. Those sharply intelligent eyes studied her, as if she were some scientific specimen.

“You, my girl, are refreshing. I long ago abandoned all hope of getting honesty from most of the *ton*, but it appears you are an exception. And if the mad sister has not sent you running from Leon’s estates to hide with your family, then you’re made of sterner stuff than I’d expected. But...” here she paused, and sipped her tea, before continuing in a softer voice, “...if, for whatever reason, you do find yourself in need of... respite... then you may come to me. Sometimes, the safest thing to do is retreat, at least temporarily.”

Iris felt her jaw drop, and forced herself to close it, to smile softly, and then to answer. That answer was also honest, and improper – but it was called for.

“Lady Neelsham, I do not know if that offer is a kindness, or a condemnation. If you think that I would so abandon Leon, if things

became... difficult, then you underestimate me, and perhaps I should be insulted. On the other hand, if you offer in a genuine wish to help, should true disaster befall – God forbid – then I thank you – for I have gained the impression that there are few people you might make such an offer to.”

The older lady froze in place for a moment, her eyebrows rising. Then, after carefully setting down her teacup, she allowed herself to laugh. It was a genuine laugh, unrestrained, and she clapped her hands together once in delight. Leon reached out and twined his fingers with Iris’, squeezing gently. When the laughter subsided, Lady Neelsham spoke again.

“I like you. And there are not many young women I like. It was a genuine offer, but the more I hear from you, the more I think that you have the strength to deal with all of this after all. Whatever happens, grant me the favour of always being this honest with me in future. And... make my grandson happy. He does not deserve the difficulties he has been forced to bear.”

What could she say to that? Her heart filled with pity for the woman before her, who had seen her loved granddaughter transform into a monster. Lady Neelsham did not deserve that burden, any more than Leon did.

“I... I will do my best, my Lady, and pray that it is enough.”

“I begin to believe that it will be. But let me say one more thing – one more thing that politeness says I should not, yet I am beyond tired of it haunting us all and no one speaking of it. My granddaughter is dying – I know that, and you know that. It is a slow painful death, of the body and the mind. I, for one, will be grateful when that agonising process is over. One should not wish anyone dead, yet when the inevitable is plain to see, it is not unreasonable to wish suffering ended. When Maggie dies, my daughter will finally be freed, but I am quite certain that she will also be lost and despairing. Promise me, that when that time comes, you will help her, as well as her son, your husband?”

Iris allowed the words to sink into her mind. They were cold hard

words, yet they echoed the thoughts she had considered so often of late. Maggie's death was inevitable, her steady decline obvious, yet no one spoke of it, as if by not saying the words, the truth of them could be avoided. Well, now they were spoken. Leon's hand had clutched hers harder, so hard that it hurt, as his grandmother spoke. Still, she returned that pressure.

“Lady Neelsham, I thank you for saying the words that none of us want to be real. And I promise you that I will do whatever I can to support everyone through the dark days ahead.”

Chapter Eleven

“A child, Camellia?”

“Yes, in a few months from now. You will be an aunt, Iris, again.”

“I can see by looking at you, that you are well, and happy.”

“I am – I have had none of the sickness in the mornings that Lily suffered with hers – and for that I am most grateful! But... perhaps you will soon be increasing as well?”

Camellia regarded her sister with a raised eyebrow, and Iris had to force herself to keep her expression cheerful and undisturbed, despite the fact that Camellia’s words made her want to squirm on her seat. She could not admit to her sister that now, even after more than two months of marriage, they had not...

She waved a hand as if those words had not just struck straight to her heart.

“I am sure that it will happen when God wills it.”

Camellia regarded her closely for a moment, then apparently chose to let the subject drop, much to Iris’ relief. Beside her, Leon released a breath, and she realised that he had been holding it, waiting to see where that conversation might take them. At that moment, the servants came to clear that course from the table, and all conversation paused while the dishes were cleared, and the dessert course was brought in.

Once it was served, Damien turned his attention to Leon.

“Tell me a little of your plans for your estates, Greenleigh – are you

tied to the traditional approaches to how your land is farmed, or exploring the new ideas?”

Iris almost laughed – that question told her, in an instant, that Damien and Camellia had been visiting Hyacinth and Kevin recently, for they had embarked on a program of modernisation at Chester Park. She realised, as she had that impulse, that she was just as interested in Leon’s answer as Damien might be – for she had no idea of his plans. Her life had been so constrained by Maggie, and the difficulty of her days, that they had never spoken of such things.

“I must confess that I am only just beginning to have any plans. During the year of mourning for my father, my attention went to simply coming to know the tenants and the estates properly, and the last few months I have been rather... distracted... from such matters.”

Iris froze for a moment – had he just implied that she was the distraction? That was certainly how Damien and Camellia appeared to have taken it. Perhaps that was for the best. She smiled, then took a mouthful of the excellent pudding before her, waiting to see what would be said next.

“Distracted? Well, I suppose that’s understandable.”

For a moment, Damien and Camellia met each other’s eyes, and Iris envied them what she saw in that look. It was full of love – love untrammelled by the need to bow to anyone else’s requirements. There was a moment of silence, then Leon spoke again.

“Over the last few weeks, I have concluded that things need to change – some of my lands are less fertile than they used to be, and some are overgrazed. I am looking at what I might do in terms of enclosure, without limiting my tenant farmers’, and the villagers’, ability to survive well. And perhaps, in one area, there might be benefit to be had from some irrigation. Introducing change will need to be done gently, but I think it can be done.”

Iris felt her heart fill with pride for this quiet man she had married – that he thought first of not harming his tenants and the villagers was wonderful, and showed, yet again, how kind a person he was. The

conversation flowed on, and for a little, Damien and Leon spoke of the matters which had been discussed in the House of Lords of late.

Iris mostly just listened, but she was aware, as she did so, of the way that her sister looked at her own husband. Camellia was so obviously happy, and Iris wondered if she, herself, would ever look like that. She hoped so, but when that chance might come... she did not know, but just thinking of it made her even more determined that, that very evening, once they got back to Greenleigh House, she would pursue the matter of kisses, and more.

And, perhaps, the matter of how they might deal with Maggie. Perchance, that conversation should come before they allowed themselves to be distracted by the physical. Iris felt compelled to tell Leon the truth of everything that Maggie had done, and to explain her own hesitation to speak of it, before now. She wanted no secrets between them – wasn't that what she, herself, had asked for?

After dinner, she went to the parlour with Camellia, as Damien carried Leon off to his study, for port, and for further discussion of estate management. Damien, being Duke of Blackwater, had very extensive estates, and was a man open to new ideas, as well as to preserving history – no doubt they would dive deep into one topic or another, and lose track of time.

Once a tea tray had been delivered, and the maid left the room, Camellia fixed Iris with a stern expression – one which bore a remarkable resemblance to their mother's expression, when she wanted to ensure that they did as asked. Iris burst into laughter.

"Camellia! You look just like Mother! Except... I don't for one moment believe that you are actually that stern – you are far too kind-hearted by nature to deliver that look convincingly."

"Oh! Drat! I have been practicing – after all, I will soon have a child who will no doubt warrant such looks at times. Have I failed that badly?"

"No, not really – it's just that I know you too well. But... why are you giving me that look now?"

Iris rather suspected that she actually knew why, but she wasn't about to admit it.

"Because you are hiding something, Iris. You never could do that well – at least not from your sisters. Tell me the truth – are you happy with Greenleigh? Is there a problem of some kind?"

Iris delayed the inevitable by taking a bite out of a small cake.

"Mmmmm, lemon cakes – did you convince the Cook at Elbury house to give your Cook the secret recipe?"

"I did. It took a great deal of persuading, and giving her niece a position as a maid, but I did it."

"Good for you."

Camellia gave her that look again.

"Iris, I do believe that you are prevaricating intentionally."

"I... umm..."

"Just tell me. If there is a problem, perhaps I can help?"

Should she admit any of it? Perhaps, just a little – just enough to get Camellia to stop asking. And perhaps she would plead tiredness, and see if they might go home early – for the conversation she needed to have with Leon was more important than this one.

"I am very happy that I married Leon. We are still finding our way with each other – after all, it was very sudden. And adjusting to his family has taken more out of me than I expected. His grandmother, for one, is redoubtable. But there is nothing at this point that needs your help – although thank you for offering."

No matter how many people offered her an escape, Iris knew that she would not take it – she would solve her problems with Leon's help, and stand by him. Camellia studied her, then gave a little shake of her head.

"I do not know that I entirely believe you, Iris. But I will not pry. It is just that I wish you to be as happy as I am, to have the kind of love that I have with Damien."

“Camellia, I assure you – I fully intend to have that kind of love too.”

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Leon sat close beside Iris as their carriage took them back to Greenleigh House. By the standards of the *ton*, it was still early – well before midnight – and his heart beat a little harder at the memory of those kisses the previous night – might they...? He twined his fingers through hers, and she looked up at him, smiling. The silence held them, but it was a comfortable silence.

He remembered the question that Blackwater had asked him, earlier in the evening – ‘was he happy? Was Iris happy?’ – he had said yes, but was that the truth? Not really. How could either of them be truly happy whilst Maggie’s actions pushed them apart? He needed to bridge that gap, needed to speak to Iris of the truth of his feelings – he had promised her ‘no secrets’ yet here he was, not speaking of the truth of his suspicions about Maggie.

When they got home, he would tell her – everything. And then, perhaps, they might finally indulge in exploring each other, physically.

The carriage drew to a stop, and they stepped down, going up to their front door as the carriage rolled away behind them, to be taken around to the coachhouse in the mews behind the house. The footman on duty opened the door and, once inside, they asked that a tea tray and a port decanter be sent up to their private parlour.

Twenty minutes later, both attired for bed, and sitting with the tea tray beside them, that silence remained. Leon sipped tea, and then set the cup down – he should speak first, and begin this – after all, it was the fact that he had not told her of his sister, before they married, which had brought them here.

“Iris... I.... there are things we should speak about.”

“Yes. I agree. But after we talk...”

She set her cup down also, and leant to him, bringing her lips softly to his, for the veriest brush of a kiss.

It was enough to send heat through him with an intensity that took his breath away.

“Iris, I promised you ‘no secrets’ - but I have not told you everything of late. Not everything of my feelings, nor everything of what I believe is happening with Maggie. I apologise for that – I want what is between us to be honest. And the very first thing that I must tell you is how I feel about you.”

She did not move from where she sat, nor do anything at all, yet he could see the tension in her – she was afraid of what he might say. In that moment, he cursed himself – he should have spoken to her of his feelings from the first point that he had truly come to recognise the scope of them.

“And... how do you feel about me?”

Her voice was low, a little shaky. He bent forward and brushed his lips over hers, as softly as she had kissed him just minutes before.

“I love you.”

The words were baldly stated. Were not such declarations supposed to be flowery, and full of poetic language? Yet he had no words like that, only the bare truth. Her sky-blue eyes widened, and her lips opened on a soft gasp.

“You...love me? I... I had hoped...”

“I love you. I think that I began to love you the very first time that we played together. It was as if that opened a door in my soul, and once opened, it could not be shut. And the more time I have spent with you, the deeper that love has become.”

“Leon... I... I love you, also. From the very first moment that I saw you play at Lady Ormondston’s musicale, I knew that I loved you.”

His heart raced, and a bubble of joyous laughter rose within him.

“I am doubly a fool then, for not telling you my feelings sooner – but I was afraid – afraid that you might not be able to love me, that

you had only chosen to marry me to avoid scandal.”

“Then we are fools together Leon, for I was afraid to tell you, lest you had offered for me just to do the honourable thing. I knew that you at least cared for me, but I was afraid that I might discover that that caring did not extend to the point of love.”

He studied her for long moments, allowing the meaning of her words to sink in, allowing his heart to expand, and the fear that he had carried for so long to drain away. Then he kissed her. Properly. Deeply. With every ounce of his being.

When they drew apart, he was dizzy with it still. But he could not allow this happiness to prevent the rest of the conversation, for to do so would leave this tarnished by secrets.

“Iris... before we go any further, I must speak to you of Maggie. I did not wish to believe her capable of it, but I have come to the painful conclusion that she has genuinely been trying to cause you actual physical harm, intentionally. I must beg your forgiveness for my failure to prevent that from happening. It is a man’s responsibility to protect and care for his wife, and I feel that I have failed you. Equally, I have failed my sister, by not protecting her from herself.”

“Leon, I do not judge it that way. I know that you cannot abandon your sister! But... I agree that something must be done, for I do not know that I can go on as it has been. For I have not told you all of what has happened. I did not intend it as secrets between us – I simply could not bear to burden you further. Nonetheless, it has become as if a secret.”

“What has she done, that I don’t know of?”

Pain and dread twisted within him – he had suspected that Maggie had done more than he had been aware of, but now, to have it confirmed.... Iris looked away for a moment, taking a sip of the cooling tea. Then she turned back to him.

“She waits until neither you, nor your mother, are there and she slips away from Mrs Withercombe to wander the house until she ‘accidentally’ comes across me, when no one else will see. Then she

trips me, or tries to make me fall on the stairs, or attacks me with whatever sharp object may be to hand. She has even flung herself upon me, and beaten at me with her fists, until the footmen had to physically remove her, and take her back to Mrs Withercombe. If she were stronger... then I might have suffered true damage. It has come close, a number of times. I am sorry that I did not tell you sooner, but I kept hoping that it might change. It has not, and lately, I have begun to fear that she wishes to kill me.”

Shock coursed through Leon at her words.

“Kill you? That is... utterly beyond the pale. I know that she is no longer a rational being, and I had concluded that she wished to harm you, but to kill...”

“I denied it to myself until shortly before we came to London, but then, I could no longer pretend. Here I feel safe. There, I do not.”

He stared into the fire for some time, his heart shattering within him. There was only one conclusion to draw from her words. His sister no longer existed. Her body still walked and talked but the person within it, the sister he had loved, was gone, irrevocably stolen from him by the disease which ravaged her body and mind. That recognition simplified things, in an odd way, made it easier to see what he must do.

“Iris, I can see only one solution for this. If we cannot get her to see that what she does is wrong, then I will lock her away -not in the rooms she now has – that would be too difficult, but in the East wing of that floor, which connects to the rest of the house by just one door – there are not even servants’ stairs or corridors into that floor of the East wing. If she is truly that completely no longer my sister, then she must be locked away to protect both you, and her, from the consequences of her madness.”

Chapter Twelve

Iris looked out of their breakfast room window at the garden, full of flowers. It was a perfect May day, after a perfect night... in bed with her husband – who loved her, as she loved him. Now, she understood that look on Camellia's face in a whole new way.

The only thing about the day which was not perfect was the fact that it was the day before they would have to return to Greenleigh Park. The thought of Maggie, and the conversation which Leon intended to have with her, stole the brightness from the day in an instant.

Whilst the fact that Leon was willing to lock Maggie away if that was what it took to protect Iris made her feel a little safer, it also made her feel deeply guilty. She could not shake the feeling that, somehow, she should have been able to avoid this situation, should have been able to discover a solution which did not force Leon to choose between his wife, and his sister. For that was what he was doing, and it broke her heart to see him make that choice, no matter how much Maggie intended her harm.

She could not imagine it – what if it had been one of her own siblings who threatened Leon? What choice would she have made?

She moved away from the window with a sigh, and went to fill her plate at the sideboard, just as Leon entered the room. She turned, and smiled at the sight of him, her heart racing and her breath coming short as memories of the night before rushed through her mind.

He returned the smile and settled into a chair, accepting a cup of

coffee from the footman. Iris joined him at the table.

“Have you eaten, Leon?”

“I have – some time ago. I left you sleeping, for you looked so very peaceful, but I’ve been up for an hour or more, dealing with all that must be organised for our return to Greenleigh Park.”

The food seemed to turn to dust in her mouth, and she reached for her cup of tea to wash that sensation away.

“Truthfully, I dread the moment when we arrive at Greenleigh Park. Not because I dislike the estate itself, but because I cannot imagine a way in which the next few weeks or more will not be distressing for all of us. And with the Season ending, and Summer ahead, there will be no reason for us to return to London for many months...”

Leon set down his cup, and met her eyes.

“We will deal with it – together. No matter what it takes. I am not willing to allow things to continue as they have been, with you in danger. If we can help Maggie, I will be happier, but if the only solution is to lock her away, and have her cared for in isolation, then so be it. As grandmother said, her decline seems to lead to only one inevitable conclusion, and we must face that.”

“Yes... but I would not have her suffer that alone.”

“Neither would I – but my first aim is to keep you from harm, as I minimise any harm to Maggie.”

“I pray that is possible...”

Iris watched, and saw the flicker of grief which passed across Leon’s face. Would that she could somehow make things better...

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The countryside was green, as Spring moved inexorably towards Summer, but Leon took no joy in it. Green had become the colour of death in his mind, the marker of Maggie’s descent into madness. Still,

he could not deny that Greenleigh Park looked beautiful, with the well-tended garden beds a riot of colour, and the sunlight bringing a soft golden tone to the walls.

The carriage drew to a stop on the forecourt, and he stepped down, looking around carefully before assisting Iris out as well. There was no sign of Maggie. Perhaps they could get into the house without a scene, this time.

The gravel crunched beneath their feet, and behind them, the second carriage rolled up the drive, bearing Lina, Belling, and a large amount of luggage, for more of Iris' possessions had been sent from Elbury House to Greenleigh House while they had been out of London, previously.

Leon looped his arm through Iris' and led her up the steps to where Waring stood, holding the door open.

"My Lord, my Lady, it is good to have you home."

Those words, so innocuous sounding in their basic meaning, were ominous to Leon's ears, for they suggested that he was needed here, to help deal with difficulties.

"Thank you, Waring. Is my mother here? Or at the Dower House?"

"At the Dower House, my Lord. I believe that she will be coming back here for dinner, as usual."

"And my sister?"

Waring's normally impassive face showed a hint of emotion for a moment, before it was ruthlessly suppressed.

"Lady Margaret was out in the gardens for most of the morning. Mrs Withercombe is trying to get her to take a nap."

"I see. Then I will not disturb anyone. Please have a tray with a light meal for both of us sent up to our private parlour. We will likely remain up there until dinner is called, unless my mother wishes to speak with us sooner. Belling and Lina will need food as well, and there is quite a quantity of luggage to deal with. Please make sure that they are fed."

“Of course, my Lord.”

Waring bowed, and turned away to deal with their requests. Iris spoke, very softly, as they began to ascend the stairs.

“Is it wrong of me to be relieved? For I am.”

“Not wrong. It is perfectly understandable.”

They went on, and had almost reached the door to their rooms when a sound made him turn. Maggie was running down the hallway towards them, her movements uneven, and her face contorted. He realised, just before she reached them, that she was not seeing him at all – her entire attention was on Iris.

“Evil witch!”

The words came out as a shrill gasp, and Maggie lashed out at Iris, her hand curled - like a cat clawing at a mouse. Leon caught that hand, just as it passed his own face, and pulled, hard.

Maggie lost her balance completely, and crumpled against him.

“Maggie, sister... you must not do such things.”

“Why not? She doesn’t belong here. Send her away, or I will make her go away, one way or another.”

Leon felt the sharp chill of fear run through him – there seemed little doubt as to what Maggie meant by those words. He caught Maggie's face in his hands, and held her, making her meet his eyes.

“Maggie, she does belong here. She is my wife. I married her, and I want her here. You must accept that.”

“I won’t. I won’t share you with anyone but Mother. We are family, and that’s all we need. She’s making you turn away from me, making you hate me. She’s a witch.”

“Maggie, I do not hate you. You are my sister, and I love you, but I can’t let you hurt other people. It simply isn’t right. You have already tried far too often – don’t imagine that I don’t know of it! If you cannot accept that, if you can’t behave, then I will have no choice but to lock you away in the second floor of the East Wing.”

He waited, watching her face as she processed his words, seeing the rebellion shift to sheer horror as she thought about it. Beside them, Iris stood frozen, silent, barely breathing as the drama played out.

“Nooooooo! Not the East Wing! You can’t, you wouldn’t.... It’s.... it’s not green!”

“I can, and I will, if you do not promise to behave.”

For just a moment, there was a look in her eyes which suggested rational thought, and hope flared within him.

“I’ll promise. I beg you, don’t lock me away in there.”

“Promise - and actually fulfil that promise – hold fast to it, regardless. You must not attempt to harm Iris in any way, is that clear?”

Maggie tried to look away, but he held her in place, even though his heart broke at the need to do so. After long minutes, she gave a small jerky nod.

“I promise not to try to harm Iris in any way. Are you satisfied? Will you leave me with my freedom?”

“I will – but this is your one last chance. If you fail to hold by that promise, then you will be locked away, despite any protest you may make – and I will not redecorate that wing in green, no matter how often you ask. Now go back to your rooms, and rest, and think on this, to make sure that you remember.”

He released Maggie, and she stepped back, turning to face Iris, and hissed like an angry cat.

“That promise holds me not to hurt you – but that doesn’t mean I can’t hate you, witch. Never forget how I feel about you.”

With that, she spun, a motion spoiled in its drama by the wobble which resulted, and hurried off towards her own rooms.

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The lock clicked on their door as Iris dropped onto the couch, her

breath ragged.

Leon came to her and gathered her into his arms. She wanted to cry, to run away, to pretend that none of this existed. But she refused to allow the tears to fall. She looked up at her husband's face, and forced a tremulous smile.

"I had not thought that you would be having that conversation this soon after our return. Will she truly hold to that promise, do you think?"

"I can but hope so. I do not want to have to lock her away, but what I saw out there... the look on her face as she flung herself at you... She was not even aware of my existence. There was nothing rational in that, nothing but the intent to harm. And I will not allow her to harm you."

"Leon... what will happen if you do lock her away, in rooms that are not all green? Will that break what little grasp she has on reality completely, do you think?"

Iris waited as a cascade of emotions crossed Leon's face. He swallowed.

"I... I do not know. Perhaps it will. Or perhaps it might change things for the better, might make her look at the world differently. I have often thought that for her to be in other rooms, which are brighter, fresh, might be better for her. I find the deep green walls in her rooms oppressive, and then, there is a scent to those rooms – an odd scent, like rodents, or illness, and I cannot but wonder if being immersed in it makes her worse. But no physician has ever suggested that a change would help, so perhaps that is my own wishful thinking."

"I suppose that we will find out. Either she will hold to that promise, or she won't, and we will know that within weeks, I suspect. But... please stay near me, until we are sure of her choices. I am ashamed to admit that I fear her."

Iris felt her cheeks flush at the admission, but they had promised no secrets between them, and she would tell him only the truth. He

bent to kiss her, a soft kiss, full of longing, and heartache. She melted into it, only for it to be interrupted by a tap at the door.

They drew apart, and Leon rose, even as the voice came to them.

“Your meal, my Lord.”

He opened the door, and a maid brought in a large tray, laden with food and drink. She set it down on the table, curtsied, and left. Leon locked the door behind her.

“Iris, for now, eat, and then rest – we will see what behaviour dinner brings, with Mother present as well. I will hope for the best.”

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Two weeks passed, as May became June, and Spring gave way to Summer. Outside, the world was beautiful, bountiful. Iris wanted to be happy, wanted to share that with Leon, but every day brought more misery.

Despite the fact that Iris played for Maggie, always with Leon at her side, Maggie’s hatred of her never waned. Every time they were in the same room, Maggie would hiss at her, or speak up, telling her to leave, calling her a witch, or worse. After each encounter, Iris was left shaking, the fear that Maggie would shift from words back to physical actions never far away. And towards the end of the second week, that fear began to seem more justified.

A number of times, Maggie stopped beside her, and reached out a hand, only to pull it back with a hiss of frustration. Iris suspected that, without the promise, Maggie would have attempted to pull her into a fall, or to trip her, or to hit her. At the dinner table, Maggie would meet Iris’ eyes, then rather violently stab her meat with her table knife. The message was abundantly clear.

How long would it be, Iris wondered, before Maggie’s desire to harm her overrode the thin strand of rationality which kept Maggie bound by that promise?

Iris went about her days with care, in Leon’s company as much as

possible. She rode out with him to meet their tenant farmers, sat with him as he met with his estate manager, and began to learn as much as she could about this place which was her home. It made her feel stronger to be more connected to it, to understand more of the workings of the house.

She spent more time with the Housekeeper and Cook, until they relaxed enough in her company to occasionally tell her stories of the past, of how Maggie had been, before the madness began to take her. Hearing those stories, her heart broke for Leon, all over again.

One evening, as they sat down to dinner, a knock came at the front door. Everyone looked up, startled. No one ever came to visit, and the messengers who brought mail or supplies generally only ever arrived in the early part of the day. Maggie flinched back in her chair, as if afraid, and Iris wondered what she was thinking, what monsters her mind had populated the world with, behind that knock on the door.

A footman soon came into the dining room, the correspondence tray in his hand.

“A messenger has brought this, my Lord. I have sent him to the kitchens to be fed.”

Iris looked on as Leon picked up the sealed missive, and opened it, the flakes of red wax dropping from it onto the table. He read in silence for a moment, as everyone else watched him, then looked up.

“Grandmother is coming to visit us, next week, Mother.”

“My mother? How peculiar. She hasn’t been here for three years.”

Maggie was frowning, and Iris got the impression that she was attempting to remember who her grandmother was. Then her expression tightened, and she hissed.

“Grandmother? I don’t like her. She hates me.” Maggie’s eyes turned to Iris. “I like her even less than I like you, witch. Leon, tell her not to come.”

“Maggie, I will not. She is our grandmother, and if she wants to visit us, she can.”

Maggie hissed again, but with a glance at her mother, left it at that. Iris firmly repressed the bubble of hysterical laughter which rose in her throat. It seemed that Lady Neelsham was going to provide her some respite after all – just not in the way that either of them had considered, at the time of their conversation in London.

Chapter Thirteen

Preparations were made for Lady Neelsham's arrival, and Leon watched with some horror as Maggie teetered ever closer to complete madness, and to breaking her promise. Her health was fading faster every day, her skin marked by lesions, and her body racked by coughing, but she still wandered about the house, with poor Mrs Withercombe trailing after her, doing her best to protect her from harm.

In his darkest moments, he considered the fact that death was coming for her, and coming fast, but he pushed those thoughts away – there would be time enough to deal with that when it happened.

Twice, as they set about the business of the house, Maggie followed them, and almost reached out to hit at Iris – each time, Leon spoke her name, clearly and firmly, and she jerked back, as if she had not been aware of what she was doing. He had the sickening feeling that it was only a matter of time – a short time – until his voice would not stop her. He would simply have to stay vigilant.

On the day that Lady Neelsham was expected, in mid-afternoon he stood in the hallway, near the landing of the main stairs. He, with Iris by his side, had just finished inspecting the rooms prepared for Lady Neelsham, accompanied by the Housekeeper. Maggie had trailed after them, muttering to herself all the while, and Mrs Withercombe had trailed after her, looking more worn and exhausted than Leon had ever seen her. It was, he thought, a rather comical sight, that procession – at least it would have been had Maggie's state not been

so terrible.

“Everything appears to be in order Mrs Jermyn. I will trust that you can adapt, if Lady Neelsham brings more staff with her than we expected.”

“Yes, my Lord, I’ve planned for the possibility.”

“Thank you.”

Mrs Jermyn bobbed a curtsey, and turned to the servants’ stairs. As she did so, Maggie hissed, then stepped up beside Iris, and grabbed her arm, shaking her. Mrs Jermyn stopped and looked back, obviously concerned, as Leon firmly took hold of Maggie.

“Maggie, no! You promised.”

Maggie struggled, and hit at Leon, as well as at Iris, the strength of hysteria allowing her to pull from his grasp.

“I don’t care! As if she wasn’t bad enough, now there will be grandmother – and even more people! You didn’t tell me that she would bring anyone with her!” She spun to face Iris again, and slapped her across the face. “You, it’s all your fault, all of it!”

Iris staggered back, and Leon took hold of Maggie, far harder this time.

“Maggie, that’s it. You promised, and you knew the consequences of breaking that promise. You are banished to the second floor of the East Wing, now, and forever.”

Maggie stilled in his grasp, and then flung herself about desperately, even as Mrs Withercombe hurried forward. Iris stepped back in horror, until the corner of the banister and balustrade at the top of the steps stopped her.

“Noooooo. It’s not green.... No Leon, no.” Maggie lurched, twisting, and pulled free from Leon again, evading Mrs Withercombe as well, and flung herself at Iris, her arms flailing, her fingers clawed. “You! You should have left! I hate you, you ruined everything when you came here, everything!”

Downstairs, the front door opened, but no one on the landing heard it.

Maggie reached Iris, and crashed into her, screeching, unbalanced, and completely out of control. Time slowed as Leon watched, and his heart filled with terror. They were at the top of the stairs, and Maggie's momentum was carrying both women to the very edge. Iris was about to fall. He could not lose her, could not have his love snatched from him, now that he had found her.

He threw himself forward, just managing to grasp Iris' skirts as she began to tumble, and tipped himself backwards to the landing floor, desperately pulling Iris with him. The fabric of her skirts tore a little, near giving way, but, after teetering, she fell back, directly into his arms.

Past her shoulder, he saw, as if impossibly slowed, the moment when Maggie, without Iris to even slightly stabilise her, was carried over the edge by her own ferocity of motion, and tumbled, her screeches becoming a scream of fear, down the steps. He pushed to his feet, his arms still cradling Iris to him, and looked down. Maggie reached the bottom, tumbling awkwardly, and came to rest with a sickening crack, her head at a very odd angle on the marble floor.

Standing not three feet away from where Maggie lay, the front door still open behind them, were Lady Neelsham, his mother, and Waring, all with matching expressions of horror. Behind him, a rather solid thump sounded, and he turned to see that Mrs Withercombe had fainted. Mrs Jermyn rushed forward to tend to her.

Iris stirred in his arms.

"Leon... is she.... Is she...?"

He swallowed, breathing deeply, trying to steady himself, as a torrent of grief filled him, closely followed by a flood of relief – a relief of which he was ashamed.

"Yes, I believe so. We had best go down. Can you manage the stairs? I could not bear it if you fell now...."

He could hear the edge of hysteria in his own voice. Iris stepped out of his arms, back away from the stairs for a moment, as if assessing her own stability, then nodded.

“I can, but I will keep a firm grip on the banister.”

Leon turned back to where Mrs Jermyn was fanning Mrs Withercombe.

“Mrs Jermyn, I’ll send one of the maids up with some smelling salts, and leave you to assist Mrs Withercombe.”

Mrs Jermyn looked up.

“Yes, my Lord. And... I’m sorry. We had all hoped that one day, she might get better.”

He nodded, the grief surging through him again, then followed Iris down the stairs. There was nothing he could do for Maggie anymore – but he was certain that, right now, his mother needed him.

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Iris reached the bottom of the stairs, and stepped carefully around poor Maggie. But then, she stopped, unsure what to do. Moments later, Leon went past her and went to his mother, folding her into his arms. Lady Neelsham seemed frozen, shocked into silence. Waring stood near them, his face filled with a great sadness.

Iris realised, in that moment, that it was up to her to act. She was Lady Greenleigh, it was her responsibility to deal with things which happened in this house. And the best way that she could help Leon and his mother was to do the things which were necessary.

“Waring... the door, if you please. Then summon two footmen to take urgent messages. We must arrange for the physician and the undertaker to come, so that her death will be correctly recorded. While we wait for them, she must be decently covered where she lies, and the small parlour prepared for her to be laid out in. Oh, and send some smelling salts up for Mrs Withercombe.”

Waring started, as if coming out of a daze, and bowed.

“Yes, my Lady.”

He turned, closed the front door, then hurried away to summon the footmen and send them on their way. His movement seemed to bring

Lady Neelsham out of her shock, and she met Iris' eyes for a moment, before speaking.

"You there," she waved her hand at one of the maids, who was peeking out of a door down the hallway, "Bring some coverings – a large sheet, or the like."

The maid nodded and scurried away.

"Thank you."

Iris was grateful for the older woman's assistance, for her own sense of shock was beginning to take hold.

"You're shaking, my girl. Take a steadying breath now."

Iris did, just as Waring reappeared, followed by two footmen and two of the maids – who promptly gave squeaks of horror at the sight of the body. Lady Neelsham fixed them with a stern glare.

"None of that fuss. Cover her with that sheet you're carrying, and then prepare the small parlour for her laying out. And ask the cook to send a tea tray to the main parlour – we will all need some sustenance to get through this."

Iris left Lady Neelsham to deal with the maids, and turned to the footmen.

"I must assume that you know where to find the physician, and the undertaker?"

"Yes, my Lady. But the physician is a distance away..."

"Then you must hurry. Each go for one of them, now, and ensure that they come immediately."

"Yes, my Lady."

They bowed, and with sidelong looks at the maids covering Maggie's body, turned, and left. Iris assumed that suitable horses were available to them in the stables – they had said nothing, so she had to trust that all would happen as she needed it to.

The maids had finished laying out the sheet over Maggie, and Lady Neelsham spoke again.

“You – stay here and make sure that nothing is disturbed. You, go and arrange a tea tray, and then set things up in the small parlour.”

The maids curtsied, and set about doing as instructed. Iris was quietly impressed by the fact that they had not become hysterical.

She went to where Leon stood, his mother sobbing into his shoulder, and gently touched his arm.

“Come into the parlour. Nothing is served by us standing here. The physician and the undertaker have been sent for.”

He looked at her, as if waking from some nightmare, only to find that the horror was real. Then he sighed.

“Mother, come to the parlour. Some tea will help settle you.”

The Dowager Lady Greenleigh gave a barely perceptible nod, tears still running down her face, and allowed herself to be led away from the stairs, and the silent, sheet-draped bundle which had once been her daughter.

Without anything else being said, Iris and Lady Neelsham followed them to the parlour. Inside, Iris was a riot of emotion – grief, that it had ended so, and that Leon and his mother were so deeply affected. Shock, that she had come so close, herself, to meeting Maggie’s fate. Relief, that the threat which had hung over her from shortly after her marriage was gone. Guilt, that she felt that relief. And a different kind of fear – that there might be things which she should do now, of which she was unaware.

But she would manage. And the presence of Lady Neelsham beside her was, unexpectedly, deeply reassuring.

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Late that evening, they finally stepped into their rooms, both exhausted and overwhelmed by the events of the day. Automatically, Leon went as if to lock the door, then stopped, his hand upon it, and gave a bark of half bitter laughter.

“I suppose I need not do that, anymore.”

He turned away from it, and went to Iris, who leant against him and spoke softly.

“It seems still like a nightmare I will wake from, even though I know it is real. Part of my mind wants you to lock the door still, for it is as if she cannot be gone, as if she might come and pound on that door at any moment.”

Her words echoed his own feelings precisely.

“I agree – it does seem impossible, even though I know it is real. It is hard to countenance, I think more from the manner of it than the fact. After all, despite my dearest wishes to the contrary, we have known for some time that her death was inevitable – but I did not expect it like this. That it came as a result of her trying to harm you makes it worse. Iris – when I saw you teetering, about to fall as she flailed at you, my heart near stopped – all I could think of was saving you, that I could not bear to lose you. But... in saving you, I made her fall a certainty, even though that was not my intent. That weighs heavily upon me.”

Iris slid her arms around him, holding him tightly, and turned her face up to his.

“You must not blame yourself in any way, Leon. She made her own choices, however irrational they were at the end. Had she not thrown herself at me like that, neither of us would have been at risk. You could not have predicted her actions. And... I am very grateful that you saved me.”

He bent and kissed her, the terrible emotional intensity of the day suddenly demanding release in a most physical demonstration of his feelings. After a few minutes, they drew apart.

“Come to bed, Iris, and let us make better memories.”

Chapter Fourteen

The graveyard was full of small summer flowers – daisies determinedly pushing their way up beside age-old headstones, to accompany those flowers left by relatives of the deceased. Overhead, the sky was a clear blue, with a light drift of clouds, and birds circled, singing. It was altogether too beautiful a day for the sadness of the occasion.

There were few mourners at the graveside as Maggie's coffin was lowered into the ground - a simple coffin, draped with a plain green cloth. The coffin was lined with green, also – let her go to God surrounded by the colour she had loved so well. Leon stood with his family, Mrs Withercombe, and most of the staff from Greenleigh Park, and held back the impulse to weep. If he did so, his mother would lose all composure, and she had fought hard to get through the day so far.

That the bright sister he remembered from his childhood had come to this was a travesty, an unreasonable cruelty which made him, at times, doubt God's plan.

But all he could do now was go on, help his mother go on, and make a life with Iris. And perhaps they would be blessed with children, which would give his mother something to step back into life for, after the long years of Maggie's illness draining her vitality too.

The vicar's voice was sonorous, steady, sending Maggie on her way, underlaid by the percussion of the soil landing on the coffin, as the gravediggers shovelled it in, closing her off from the light forever. And then it was done. Silence surrounded them, broken only by the

cry of a bird.

Lady Neelsham was the first to move, gently herding everyone towards the carriages which stood waiting in front of the old village church. For three centuries the Atherton family, the Marquesses and Marchionesses of Greenleigh, had been buried here – perhaps half of the gravestones marked the memory of those Leon could count as relatives and ancestors. At least, the thought came, Maggie went to her maker in company of family.

The servants bundled into carriages, and set off up the road, even as he, his mother, Iris, Lady Neelsham and Mrs Withercombe stepped up into their own conveyance.

As they rolled away from the church, Lady Neelsham spoke, her voice soft, and pensive.

“I loved her once, when she was a child. I wish I could have truly maintained that love as the madness took her. I regret that failing on my part. Perhaps, if she has, in heaven, regained her sanity, she will hear me, and forgive me.”

Lady Greenleigh shattered at those words, sobs of grief racking her, and Leon slipped his arm around his mother to comfort her, as Iris reached out to place her hand on Lady Neelsham’s.

“I am sure that she forgives you, Lady Neelsham.”

They lapsed into silence, Mrs Withercombe sniffing into a handkerchief, and Lady Greenleigh’s sobs dying away after a while. Soon, the house came into sight, and then Lady Greenleigh spoke.

“Leon, can we remove every trace of green from the house? I have already done so at the Dower House – I had to do so for my own sanity – but now, I would ask you to do that in the main house as well. I would keep the memories of her childhood, not the ones after the madness began.”

“Mother, I am more than happy to do so. Indeed, I had intended that very thing. I will arrange for the work to begin tomorrow. Of a certainty, the house will feel lighter and brighter, with that oppressive colour gone. The more Maggie became obsessed with it, the more I

came to hate it, for it was as if the colour had stolen her from me.”

Mrs Withercombe looked up at that point, and for a moment, Leon wondered if she would object, but then she smiled.

“I am so very happy to hear that. I have seen enough of green to last a lifetime, and over the last few years, since that wallpaper was last replaced, I have not felt at my best – indeed, I worried at times that my own mind was suffering by some contagion. And it was so hard to keep the rooms clean – that paper seemed to shed a dusting of green on everything, at least at first.”

Leon nodded, for he had noticed that issue too.

“I thank you, Mrs Withercombe, for your devoted care of Maggie. Will you help us redecorate those rooms, and others in the house? Will you stay with us?”

A tension which he had not noticed until now left Mrs Withercombe’s frame.

“I will, and gladly. I had wondered if I would still have a place, now...”

Opposite him, Iris met his eyes, then spoke.

“Mrs Withercombe, of course you have a place. And... if Leon and I are blessed with children, will you be nanny to them, as you were to Leon?”

Mrs Withercombe burst into tears again, but these were happy tears, and Leon felt his heart swell at Iris’ words. Children... he had thought that perhaps he would never have children, and now... how much everything had changed in just a few days.

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Iris stood at the window of the room which had been Maggie’s and watched the first cart rumble away down the lane, past the stables and off towards the village, and beyond. That cart contained the last of the furniture and furnishings which had been in this room, and the second cart held the last of the rubble – the stripped wallpaper, the torn away

green painted wainscotting – every last trace of what had been, every last touch of green.

Around her, the room was clean, fresh, the walls cleaned back to bare timber and plaster and simply whitewashed, the floor newly ground back and polished. No green dust remained to tarnish it, no strange scent of rodents and illness. The only scent was the floor polish, and that was a pleasant smell. Tomorrow, the men would come to install new wainscotting, in the palest of timbers, to reinforce the lightness of the room. After that, there would be furniture, and drapes – all pale, all soft colours – nothing bright or harsh.

They had decided that these rooms would become a guest suite – rarely used, but pleasant to be in. There were too many memories here, even with the green gone, for anyone in the household to wish to live in these rooms.

Down the hall, not far from the rooms she shared with Leon, was another newly redecorated room – a room designed to be a nursery, when that time came.

She was happy – happier than she had ever been in her life, and she felt clearer of mind than she had since she first came to Greenleigh Park, as if all that had happened was a distant dark dream. Everyone seemed happier – and healthier – Mrs Withercombe, now well rested, and without the stress of daily dealing with Maggie, seemed ten years younger, and declared herself healthier than she had been for years. Iris couldn't help but wonder if that was at least in part due to no longer having to go into that green miasma for part of each day.

The carts disappeared from sight, and Iris turned away from the window. She would go down to the music room, and play, would let the music speak of her happiness in ways that words could not. Perhaps Leon would join her, once he was back from his weekly check on the tenant farmers.

As Leon strode from the stables to the house, the sound of music drifted to him on the summer air. Iris was in the music room, playing. He smiled, and looked down at himself – was he too dusty from his riding to go straight to her? He thought not, as he brushed away what dust he could see.

A few minutes later, he slipped quietly into the music room, and went to sit beside her on the pianoforte bench. She kept playing, but turned her head to grant him a smile. Effortlessly, as he moved his hands to the keys, she changed the pattern of her playing to allow him to take up the second strand of melody in the piece.

Peace filled him, and a sense of wholeness, as the music wrapped around them, binding them ever tighter together, soul to soul. They played for some time, until the light through the windows changed to the gold of late afternoon, then, reluctantly, he drew his hands back. Iris played the last poignant notes of the pieces, and stopped also.

She turned her sky-blue eyes to him as the sound faded away, and he bent to kiss her, happier than he had ever been in his life. She returned the kiss with passion, and he contemplated the idea of simply carrying her off upstairs, but then he stopped – that, desirable as it was, could wait – he had things to tell her.

“Iris... I have something to ask you.”

His tone was light, almost teasing.

“Oh? And what would that be?”

“Would you like to join me on a journey? For it occurred to me that we did not have a wedding trip, as so many do.”

“A journey... that could be pleasant – but where would we go?”

He lifted his hand to stroke her cheek gently.

“I thought that, whatever we might do, it should involve music. Does the idea of a few weeks in Bath, and a visit to Mr Loder’s Music Warehouse appeal to you?”

Her smile was as bright as the summer sun.

“I should very much enjoy that. But... what would we buy when

there? For surely we couldn't visit such a place without buying something...."

He laughed softly, amused at her expression.

"I agree – we couldn't. Which is why I thought that we might order a new pianoforte, of the latest design, and perhaps a harp to accompany it?"

She clapped her hands together in delight, then pulled him to her for another kiss, before declaring that delight.

"You, Leon, are truly the most wonderful man."

"And you, the most wonderful woman. I must thank you, as I think I have never done so before, for slipping into the music room at Lady Gillieston's that day, so long ago – for had you not done so, I would not have ever had you as wife, and had the happiness I now have."

She laughed, an infectious giggle of delight, before finally managing to stop it long enough to speak again.

"Oh dear – that is so very funny – that after all of those years of being taught to be proper, and always behave with propriety, the thing which has brought most happiness into my life was the one time that I did everything I shouldn't have."

He joined her in the laughter at that, then pulled her to her feet to twirl her around the room in a waltz to silent music. Soon, dizzy, they stopped, and simply stood, holding each other. He grinned at her again.

"Shall we leave tomorrow? Grandmother is here, and she can keep Mother company, as well as Mrs Withercombe – there is no need for us."

"Yes. Tomorrow would be wonderful – although perhaps Belling and Lina will not be very happy, to have to pack everything for us, so fast."

"I am sure that they will cope – after all, they are very efficient. And I simply can't wait to run away with you, to have a holiday from all responsibility, with nothing to do but love you, and think about

music.”

Epilogue

“I absolutely refuse to get into a carriage until late enough in the day that I have ceased to feel disgustingly ill. So we will depart Bath after midday tomorrow. I do not care that it means we will have to stay in an Inn overnight, halfway home.”

Iris, prepared to defend her demands, had found herself laughing instead, when Leon simply shrugged, and bowed in a very theatrical manner.

“As my Lady commands.”

They had stayed in Bath far longer than they had intended, both for sheer enjoyment, despite their need to wear mourning clothes still, and because they had met the Earl of Westmoreland who, it turned out, had grand plans for creating a National Academy of Music. That meeting had led to many more, and many long discussions, which would likely change the path of their lives forever, should his plans come to fruition.

Every day had been a joy, and she was quite certain that she was increasing. The sickness in the mornings was a rather tell-tale sign.

Now, in the early afternoon of the next day, she settled into the carriage, glad that the queasiness had passed. On the seat opposite them, their new harp was settled, wrapped in cloths and tied into place. It was, she thought with amusement, even more fragile than she was.

Soon, they were moving, and she allowed herself to lean against

Leon, who slipped his arm around her and held her as she drifted into sleep. She woke as they slowed, turning into an Innyard, just as the last late gold of the dusk turned to the rich blue-violet that presages night.

The Innkeeper greeted them with enthusiasm, and provided a large suite of rooms, with enough space for Belling and Lina too and, after an excellent meal, she gratefully fell into the surprisingly comfortable bed with Leon. She fell asleep soon after, with his hand resting gently on the curve of her stomach.

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Leon woke to the sound of Iris retching. The light through the edge of the shutters suggested that it was early still, but he could hear the sound of activity in the innyard below. He pushed himself up out of the bed, pulled a banyan around him, and took a glass of water to Iris as she sat back from retching.

“I will be so glad when this stage of the process is over! Why am I not as lucky as Camellia? She was barely ill at all!”

“I am told that it is different for each woman, my love, but that it rarely lasts past the first few months.”

“This retching cannot end soon enough!”

“I agree. Shall I send for some simple food? Will that help, or make it worse?”

“I do not know, but it is worth doing, in case it does help.”

The food was duly sent for, and Lina roused to help her dress and restore herself to a semblance of normal. Leon left them to it, allowing Belling to dress him, even while the valet muttered about the impossibility of keeping garments uncrushed when travelling.

The food, it turned out, did not help. So they sat in their private parlour and read, until the point in the day when Iris declared movement a safe possibility. In truth, Leon did not mind – to travel slowly like this was a new experience, and rather pleasant.

Once they were on the road, his mind went to what would be waiting for them at home. The echoes of the old dread still rose in his mind, and he had to remind himself that Maggie was gone, that there would be no scenes, no dragging grief of watching her suffer. He was not glad to have lost a sister, but he was beyond glad that she no longer suffered.

Greenleigh Park would be welcoming, and calm. That thought was, all by itself, exciting. He imagined the harp in the music room, imagined how the new pianoforte, of the very latest design, would look when it arrived, and he imagined how the nursery would look, once it was completed.

Mrs Withercombe would be so in alt at the idea of a baby to care for soon. That made him smile – she deserved the chance to be happy again too, and she had always been happiest when caring for young children.

He leant back into the corner of the seat and the carriage wall, with Iris leaning against him, and allowed himself to drift into sleep, lulled by the rumble of the carriage wheels on the earth of the road.

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Home.

Iris savoured the word as it rose in her mind.

She was home.

Greenleigh Park glowed with the lamplight from its windows, a welcoming beacon in the last of the summer twilight. No trace of fear remained within her at the sight of it – only a deep-seated happiness, and the certainty that this was where she was supposed to be.

She pushed herself up to sit straight, leaving Leon still dozing, leaning against the wall, and watched the house as they approached. The scent of roses came to her as they turned onto the gravel of the forecourt, and she breathed deeply of the still warm summer air.

The carriage slowed, and Leon woke, sitting up and reaching for her hand. She twined her fingers with his, and they simply sat,

watching. Of course, as soon as they stopped, that peacefulness was shattered by the bustle of getting down from the carriage, of the harp and their other luggage being unloaded, and of the staff all finding reasons to be in a position to welcome them home.

Once inside, they were met by Lady Greenleigh, Lady Neelsham, and Mrs Withercombe, all fussing about and overjoyed to see them. The house felt different, Iris realised, as if any lingering echoes of the pain of the past were gone. The three women all looked bright and healthy too. It was as if the shadows had been brushed away from everything.

Lady Neelsham regarded her quietly as Leon greeted his mother. Those sharp, intelligent eyes missed nothing, and a small, pleased smile curved the old woman's lips.

"Well then girl, increasing, are you? About time. This house needs new children to brighten it up."

Mrs Withercombe and Lady Greenleigh spun to face her, their expressions hopeful, and she laughed at the sight.

"Yes, I am increasing, I believe. Lady Neelsham, you are as astute as ever. But I strictly forbid any coordinated fussing over me, or I shall go quite spare." Everyone laughed, but she could see that Mrs Withercombe struggled to prevent herself from dragging Iris directly to the nursery. "Mrs Withercombe, I promise that tomorrow, after I have finished retching for the morning, we can set to work on preparing the nursery."

Mrs Withercombe smiled broadly, and they managed to move forward out of the foyer, and into the parlour. They ate the food that was pressed upon them, and drank the tea gratefully, but then, claiming tiredness after travelling, chose to retire.

When they neared their door, Iris took Leon's hand, and tugged him on, towards the rooms which had once been Maggie's. He allowed himself to be led, and soon they stood in those rooms, which were lit only by the rising moon.

"Leon, does it feel right to you? Now that we have changed it?"

“It does, but...” he walked around what had been her bedchamber, his fingers trailing over the new pale wood wainscoting, then back into the little parlour where the smaller pianoforte still stood. The sheets which had covered it while the work had been done had been removed, and the inlaid wood of its surface gleamed in the moonlight. He sat on the bench, raised the lid, and traced his fingers over the keys. “...play with me?”

Iris went to him, and settled beside him as she had done so often before. Yet this time was different. As she sat, she felt watched – it was not a threatening feeling, more one of curiosity.

Leon began to play – one of the pieces that Maggie had most loved – and she meshed her movements with his, and joined him playing a gentle melodic counterpoint to his rendition of the main piece. The music filled her, and joined them as it always did. But there was something more.

It was as if fingers brushed her cheek gently, then trailed down her arm to her hand. She kept playing, but turned startled eyes to Leon.

“Did you...”

“I felt it too.”

“Do you think...?”

“Perhaps. Perhaps it’s a blessing. Or a goodbye.”

“Then I will speak as if it is, despite that some might think me unhinged for doing so. Maggie, if what I feel is you, know that I bear no ill-will towards you. Go in peace to whatever is next. I am glad that your pain is over. I wish that I had known you, before...”

They kept playing, both so well practiced that they could separate the act of doing so from what they thought or said. The sensation of being touched came again, and Leon spoke, as softly as Iris had.

“Farewell sister. I did the best that I knew how, and it was not enough. Forgive me.”

There was no sound but the pianoforte, but somehow, they each heard words in their minds – only later would they, speaking of it,

discover that they had both heard ‘I forgive you’.

The piece they were playing came to an end, and silence filled the room. Then, ever so gently, the keys of the pianoforte moved, a light glissando of barely-there sound. Then the sense of presence was gone, and the rooms around them were truly empty of all but moonlight.

Outside, an owl called, and the sound shattered the peculiar stillness. Leon took her hand, and stood, pulling her to her feet, and into his arms. The kiss was deep, and full of so many things unspoken, full of life, and love, and the possibilities of the future. They drew apart in the end, slightly breathless.

He released her, and twined his fingers with hers.

“Come, my love, we should go to bed. That was a necessary ending, but now, it is our time for a new beginning.”

“I love you Leon, I always have.”

The End.

I hope that you enjoyed ‘A Maiden for a Marquess’.

You’ll find a preview of the next book in the series ‘A Heart for an Heir’, after the About the Author section of this book.

Author's Note

In this book, as in many of my others, there are things which were real, things which really happened, although not, perhaps, in exactly the way that I have portrayed them. In this book, the following things are things that really happened / existed:

- **Copper arsenite poisoning.** That is what Maggie is suffering from, although in 1820, it was only just being identified by a small number of doctors. Arsenic compounds were used in all sorts of things, from 'health tonics' to makeup, even in food colouring (!!!) all through the centuries. People therefore, whilst they were aware that ingesting a large quantity of arsenic would kill you, regarded small quantities, and its use in non-food items, as harmless. The use of arsenic in the colours used for clothing, wallpaper, carpet, paint and the like resulted from the fact that it made the colours brighter, and made them last longer. In the 1770s a colouring agent made using copper and white arsenic (Scheele's green) became popular, and was soon used extensively.

Despite the fact that people who worked with it were suffering terribly and dying, that was ignored – the wealthy wanted their bright colours (green was the main culprit, although arsenic was used in other bright colours too). In around 1814, an enhanced version of that green colouring, which was even more permanent, was invented (called Paris green) and it was, accordingly, even more poisonous.

The stuff came off flocked and patterned wallpaper as dust, it 'gassed off' as arsenic gas out of garments and wallpaper, as oxidation occurred over time (it was said to smell like a mouse

nest) and it could be absorbed through the skin, as well as breathed in or eaten.

Which meant that pretty much everything coloured was poisonous. There were many deaths, especially in the poor who worked in the factories which produced coloured things, and amongst the older or very young members of wealthier families who could afford the wallpapers and brightly coloured cloth. (those deaths were slow and agonising, with impacts on the gut, the ability to breath, the skin and more, as well as the mind in the end)

What confused matters a lot was that, it turns out, the more protein you eat, the better equipped your body is to process arsenic out of the system – so the healthier, wealthy adults, with larger body mass, and a higher protein diet, either didn't get sick, or didn't get as sick – and they were the ones making decisions about what was happening.

It took until the 1850s for the truth to be recognised, and even longer for laws to be passed in various countries banning the use of arsenic in almost everything. (so, if you ever decide to buy a genuine mansion which dates from the early to mid-1800s, and has green wallpaper or paint anywhere... Get it tested as soon as you go near the place).

As this story is set in 1820, no one understood what was happening to Maggie. Mrs Withercombe was minimally affected, because she was only in that room when helping Maggie a few times a day – but Maggie slept in there, which vastly increased her exposure to the poison. The others' refusal to decorate any of the rest of the house in green saved their lives.

- **King George III dying and the Prince Regent acceding to the throne** – This really happened – King George the third, who had been ill for a long time (that's why the Prince Regent was Regent) died on the 29th of January 1820.

- **The timing of mourning for the King** - There was a strict official protocol for how long mourning should be for a member of royalty. The different degrees of mourning determined how ‘severely dark’ the clothing was which could be worn, as well as activities which were allowed. Here is the table with the details.

	Deep mourning	Mourning	Half mourning	Total
For the King and Queen	8 weeks	2 weeks	2 weeks	12 weeks
Son or Daughter of the Sovereign:	4 weeks	1 weeks	1 weeks	6 weeks
Brother or Sister of the king or queen:	2 weeks	4 days	3 days	3 weeks
Nephew or Niece, Uncle, Aunt		1 week	1 week	2 weeks
Cousin German		7 days	3 days	10 days
Distant Relations		4 days	3 days	1 week

- **The calling of the House of Lords to manage the formal bits of the transition from one King to the next** – This is part of the process – for the Lords of the land must make sure that the transition is smooth, undisputed, and that no lawlessness occurs while it happens.
- **The existence of the Loder Music Warehouse in Bath** – Bath was, from the early 1700s on, filled with ‘toy-shops’ which also sold instruments, music, and pretty much any complex mechanical gadget, as well as small children’s toys. There were different ones which were there at any one time, and different ones which became pre-eminent in their era.

In 1820, John David Loder’s Music Warehouse (he was the third generation Loder to run it) was the pre-eminent musical everything shop in Bath.

- **The Earl of Westmoreland wanting to start a National**

Academy of Music – this really happened (and he succeeded, some years later.)

So there you have it – a scatter of real history rolled into your fiction. Maggie, of course, also shows some signs of being mildly autistic – hence the OCD like obsession with green – an obsession which doomed her, one day at a time. The only reason that she lived as long as she did, was that she left the house to walk amongst the ‘green of the gardens and trees’ which gave her some time away from the fumes and dust in her chambers.

I hope that you find this sort of historical information interesting!

Arietta Richmond

About the Author

Arietta Richmond has been a compulsive reader and writer all her life. Whilst her reading has covered an enormous range of topics, history has always fascinated her, and historical novels have been amongst her favourite reading.

She has written a wide range of work, from business articles and other non-fiction works (published under a pen name) but fiction has always been a major part of her life. Now, her Regency Historical Romance books are finally being released. The Derbyshire Set is comprised of 11 novels (9 released so far). The 'His Majesty's Hounds' series is comprised of 17 novels, with the last now released.

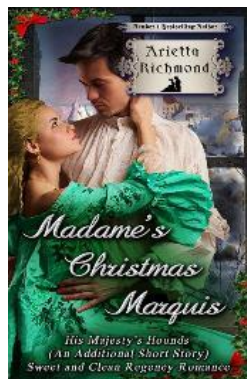
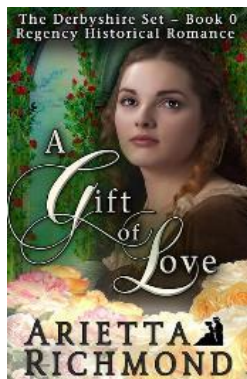
She also has a number of standalone novels released, and four other series of novels at various stages of release. She lives in Australia, and when not reading or writing, likes to travel, and to see in person the places where history happened.

Be the first to know about it when Arietta's next book is released! Sign up to Arietta's newsletter at

<http://www.ariettarichmond.com>

When you do, you will receive two free subscriber exclusive books - **'A Gift of Love'**, which is a prequel to the Derbyshire Set series, and ends on the day that 'The Earl's Unexpected Bride' begins, and **'Madame's Christmas Marquis'** which is an additional story in the His Majesty's Hounds series.

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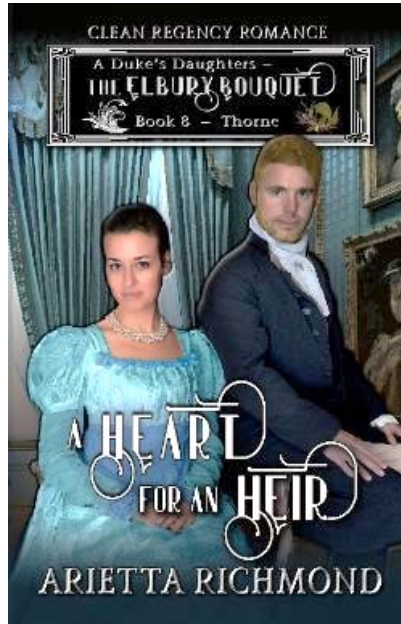
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Here is your preview of

A Heart for an Heir



**A Duke's Daughters –
The Elbury Bouquet - Book 8 - Thorne**

Arietta Richmond

Chapter One

Thorne Gardenbrook, Marquess of Wildenhall, stared out of the Elbury House parlour window at the perfect May afternoon. It irritated him unreasonably.

The house was too quiet, now that all of his sisters were married and gone off to live their own lives, and he was left without an easy distraction. Growing up with seven younger sisters had kept him busy – teasing them, protecting them, escorting them about London and more. But now... it had been nearly two months since Iris' wedding, and his ability to entertain himself was proving to be minimal.

And if his mother hinted, one more time, that now the girls were all married, it was his turn...

He spun away from the window. He would go out, perhaps ride in Hyde Park...

Fifteen minutes later, when he came back down, changed into attire suitable for riding, he was very glad that he had made that choice.

“Thorne! I wanted to talk to you...”

“Sorry Mother – perhaps when I return? I should be back in time for dinner.”

The Duchess huffed in annoyance, then shrugged, well aware that he was just as stubborn as she was, despite the fact that the impression he gave to the world was one of cheerful good humour.

“I will take that as a promise, and hold you to it. Enjoy your

afternoon.”

He sketched a rather impertinent bow, and went towards the back of the house and the door which led to the kitchen garden, and beyond that, the stables.

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He reached Hyde Park before the most popular time for the *ton* to be there, and allowed himself the luxury of riding far faster than was truly acceptable in the Park. The rush of air past his face seemed to clear away his irritation with the world, and he soon slowed to a steady trot, allowing his horse to cool down after the run. He chose to ride away from the main paths, winding through the trees, and in and out of small clearings near the river.

At one point, as he came out of the trees, he saw a man on the opposite bank – a man engaged in exercise, it seemed. The gentleman had shed his coat, hanging it upon a branch, and was just finishing a set of movements involving a sword, which glittered in the sun as he moved. Thorne halted, and watched, fascinated by the precision which was so effortlessly brought to the movements.

Eventually, the man stopped, coming to a stillness as precise as the movements had been, then, without fuss, he lifted something from the grass near the tree where his coat hung, and slid the sword into it. At first, Thorne thought it a scabbard, until the man set it down again, pulled his coat on, lifted it, and walked away.

In that instant, he realised that what had been a sword was now an innocuous looking cane.

A sword cane.

An idea arrived in his mind, whole and complete, without any warning – he would go to Mr Thomas Black’s shop, and purchase himself a sword cane, then, next time he saw him, he would ask Blackwater to teach him to use it. Not that Thorne couldn’t wield a sword... but Damien, his brother-in-law, was infinitely better than he

was, and had much practice with sword canes in particular.

That would give him something to do, and something his mother likely would not interrupt.

He turned his horse, and set off at a steady slow canter, winding through the trees, back towards the Park gates, and the streets of London beyond.

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Lady Faith St John studied herself in the mirror. Wearing colours again was delightful, after the months of mourning for King George III. But was *she* delightful? She was beginning to suspect that she very much wasn't. This was her second Season, the first having been rather later than ordinary due to her father's and then her elder brother's deaths, and affected by scandal not of her making.

And most of this Season had been overshadowed by the mourning for the King's death. And now, she was twenty-one – tantamount to a spinster in the eyes of the *ton*. Some gentlemen had shown interest, it was true – but they were mainly the gamblers who found her dowry more attractive than anything else.

Perhaps tonight would be better, now that the mourning was finished – perhaps someone interesting would be there, someone new. Shaking her head, she laughed softly. There was no point deluding herself – the possibility of her making a good match was becoming vanishingly small. But... she refused, absolutely refused, to consider marrying one of the gamblers, or one of the men who cared nothing for her mind, and everything for her breasts, and more.

Rejecting the advances of men like that was becoming a sadly more frequent requirement, as they assumed that her approaching spinsterhood would make her desperate, and willing to accept them. Which she was not. Although desperate was beginning to be an accurate description...

She picked up her book, and went down to the parlour – perhaps

an afternoon reading would put her in a better frame of mind.

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The shopfront of Bentick and Black, Gentlemen's Outfitters was plain, yet boasted an elegant sign, recently redone with gilded letters. The street it was found on was respectable, if not in the first stare of fashion, as far as a location to shop.

Thorne rode along the street towards it, slowly, looking about for an urchin to hold his horse – surely, here, where there were shops, there would also be urchins looking to earn a coin. That assumption proved correct, and a boy slipped out of a narrow lane, and called to him.

“ ‘old yer ‘orse, milord?”

“Yes. I'll be going into Bentick and Black.” Thorne swung down, and pulled out a coin, handing it to the boy. “There's another of those for you, when I come out, so long as all is well with my horse.”

The boy took the coin, and examined it, eyes glowing – a shilling was far more than the service warranted, but Thorne saw no reason not to be charitable.

“Yes, milord!”

He passed the boy the reins, and turned his attention to the shop. As he did, the door opened, and a woman stepped out, a cloak wrapped around her. She pulled the door closed behind her, and that movement opened the cloak for a short while – long enough for Thorne to see her tuck a package into her pockets, before she set off away from him, down the street, at some speed.

Most curious. What was a woman doing coming out of a Gentlemen's Outfitters? And why was she swaddled in a large cloak, when the day was warm, even for May? And, most curious of all, what was in the package that she had so swiftly tucked away?

He shook his head. It was none of his business, and he should forget about it entirely, but, still....

Thorne strode to the door and opened it, causing a tinkle of small bells.

He stopped for a moment, blinking in the relative dimness after the bright sun outside.

“Can I help you, my Lord?”

Thorne went to where a man stood behind the counter. His uncanny resemblance to Blackwater still shook Thorne, even though he had now seen him a number of times.

“Mr Black, I have come to commission a sword cane from you. I believe that it is time I learnt to use one. I am told that they are quite different to a fencing rapier.”

The man looked at him, now seeing him clearly in the beam of sunlight which shone through the large front window.

“Ah, my Lord... Wildenhall, isn't it?”

“Yes – I did not expect you to recognise me.”

Mr Black laughed.

“I regard it as a matter of importance to memorise the names and appearance of all those in my half-brother's wife's family. I would not wish to embarrass Blackwater by getting such things wrong.”

“I see. Well – what must we do, for you to make me a suitable sword cane?”

Mr Black came out from behind the counter, and led Thorne to the back of the shop area, where a rack of canes filled one wall.

“We will see which of these feels best to you, for your arm length, and the balance of it, then I will be able to define the exact specifications of what I must craft for you.”

An hour passed, in which Thorne learnt more of swords and canes than he had ever expected to, and found it surprisingly interesting.

Then, they spoke of the price, and the time required for it to be made, and came to an agreement. Thorne, always conscious of how many of the *ton* did not pay tradesmen well, wrote a bank draft for

half of the sum agreed immediately, and passed it to Mr Black.

“Thank you, my Lord. I do appreciate those who pay without being chased for it.”

“I quite consciously choose not to be like many of my peers, on matters such as this.”

Mr Black bowed, then tucked the bank draft away.

“Will there be anything else, my Lord?”

Thorne went to say no, to leave, but then the image of the woman leaving the shop rose in his mind, and curiosity drove him.

“Mr Black... as I came in, I saw a woman leave this shop, tucking something away. I admit to curiosity – why would a woman, wrapped in a cloak as if for concealment, be visiting a Gentlemen’s Outfitters?”

Mr Black regarded him for some time, and Thorne wondered if he had offended the man. But then Black nodded, as if coming to a decision.

“I believe I’ll tell you the truth of it, my Lord, for your family have proven to be trustworthy. I make and sell more than sword canes, as you know, but some of what I make is never seen in this shopfront. If you’ll forgive me for it, I’ll be blunt. I’m bastard-born – my mother at least did what she did out of love, however misplaced, but there are many women who end up with child, and not by willing choice, and many bastard-born children whose lives are far worse than mine has been. I want to give women a choice, a way to defend themselves.”

Thorne contemplated those words, he could certainly agree with the sentiment.

“But... how?”

“Two ways, my Lord. With the weapons I make for them – knives disguised as those small tubes that women keep knitting needles and scissors in, for sewing, and other similar items that can fit in a reticule or a pocket – and by the things I teach them, about how to... fight dirty... shall we say, when a man attempts to do things they don’t want.”

“That’s... a wonderful idea! When my sisters were younger, as they got closer to the age when men noticed them, I taught each one of them just where to apply a knee, or the heel of a boot, to... discourage... an overenthusiastic gentleman. One or two of them even used that knowledge to good effect a few times. But where do you do this? And how do you find the time?”

“That’s the rub, my Lord. There really isn’t enough time, since Blackwater acknowledged me, and the *ton* decided that they like my work. And there isn’t really enough space here, either...”

Thorne stared at the counter top, unseeing, his mind turning it all over. He needed something to do, and something worthwhile – he refused to just drink and gamble his life away. He had funds – and he knew that Mr Black did too, now. What if... they could work together, and find a nearby building to buy, for just this purpose?

“Mr Black, does the idea of founding a personal defence school for women of the lower classes appeal to you?”

“Of course, my Lord, it’s what I’ve been working towards – but... the time, and the finding of a place...”

“Mr Black, are you willing to take a partner in this venture? Because I have time, and I have funds to contribute.”

Mr Black half gasped.

“You’d involve yourself in such a thing? You, a Duke’s heir?”

“A Duke’s heir with not enough to do, and a desire to help women – having seven sisters will make you think like that. For that matter, if I could think of a way to create a personal defence school for young women of the *ton* as well, I would. But how any of them might escape their mamas to attend I cannot, at this point, imagine.”

“You’ve the right of it there, my Lord. But perhaps, if we start with the commoners, you’ll come up with an idea, later...”

“By that statement, I take it that you’ll have me as a partner in this endeavour?”

“Indeed – I’d be a fool to turn you away.”

“Excellent! While you set to making my sword cane, I will set about finding us a building – close enough to here for convenience, and inconspicuous enough that the women coming to it will feel safe.”

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Marion, Countess of Hungerwood, spluttered, nearly dropping her teacup.

“Faith! You did what?!”

“I applied my knee to Lord Parrington’s privates, with some considerable force. He released me with pleasing alacrity. I left him curled up on the terrace tiles, moaning piteously. It was entirely his own fault for attempting to continue when I had said no.”

“Oh dear! No wonder he looked so very unwell when he came back into the ballroom. But was that wise? Will not that action likely make all men, good or bad, avoid your company? Men are, after all, quite sensitive about such treatment...”

Lady Faith St John sipped her own tea, and smiled, despite the fact that Marion’s words sent a tiny frisson of fear through her.

“If they are afraid that I might do such a thing to them, then I can only assume that they would consider doing something to deserve it. And if that is the case, then I do not wish to know them.”

“That is a valid point. We will just have to see if Parrington spreads gossip, or if he is too embarrassed to admit he was felled so by a ‘slip of a girl’.”

“Perhaps we would all be better off if more young women of the *ton* knew how to do such things, how to defend themselves from unwanted amorous advances.”

“Perhaps we would, indeed.”

Faith nodded, and they went on to talk of other things, until Marion departed to visit her previous parents-in-law. Faith went out into the hall, intending to go up to her rooms, only to be stopped by one of the maids.

“My Lady, if I could speak to you for a moment?”

“Of course Janie.”

Faith regarded the maid curiously, and stepped back into the parlour with her.

“My Lady, did you really apply your knee to a gentleman’s privates? At a Ball???”

“I did, and very effective it was.”

“I’m sorry for eavesdropping, my Lady, but when I heard you say that, as I passed the door, I stopped, shocked. But what really caught my attention was when you said it would be better if more young women knew how to defend themselves. My Lady... some of us have been learning a bit about that. My cousin, who works at Lady Cobbett’s, heard about it first and she told me. There’s a man who owns a shop – he’s been making ladies weapons for commoner women like me, and teaching them how to use them. It’s a pity no one does that for the ladies of the *ton* – although perhaps the ladies of the *ton* don’t need to defend themselves so often as we do?”

Faith laughed, shaking her head.

“Sadly, I think that the ladies of the *ton* have almost as much unwanted attention to deal with as any other woman – however, we at least sometimes have powerful relatives to help us. But... tell me more about this man and his shop. What sort of weapons does he make for ladies?”

Janie glanced around, as if worried that someone would overhear, or see them, then reached into the large pockets of her skirts, and pulled out a tube, made of leather. It looked like one of those things that ladies kept sewing or knitting implements in. Faith eyed it curiously.

“Like this, my Lady. If I open the lid here, it has a space for needles and the like, just as you’d expect, but if I then push this little button inside...”

Janie demonstrated, and part of the interior of the case popped up. Janie grasped it, and pulled, producing a wickedly sharp small dagger.

“Oh my! That would make most men pause, I should think.”

Janie nodded.

“It certainly made that odious groom from next door pause, when he thought to kiss me in the lane.”

Faith studied the maid for a moment, her mind full of questions and ideas. And hope – for if someone was making this possible for the maids and women of the streets, then perhaps it would be possible for women of the aristocracy too.

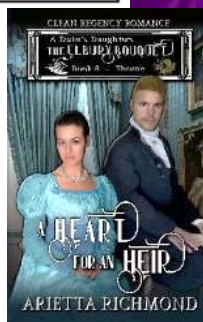
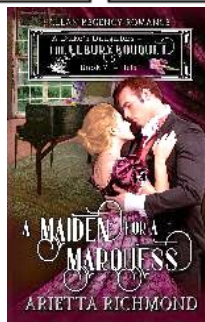
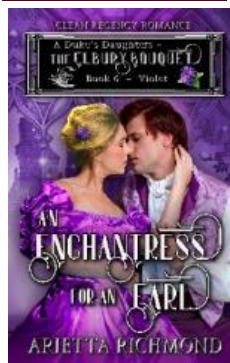
“Tell me, who is this man, and where is his shop?”

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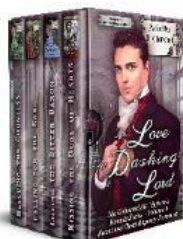
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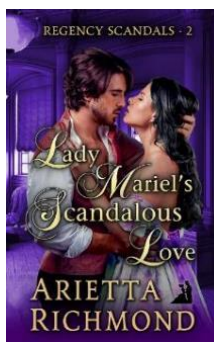
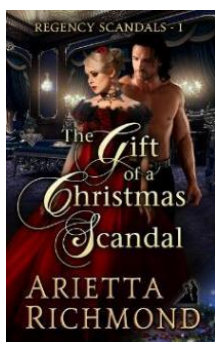
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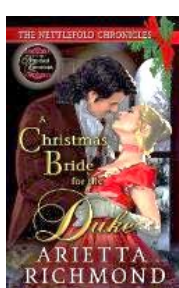
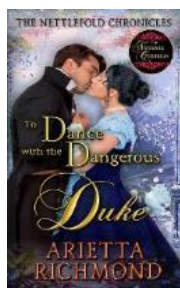
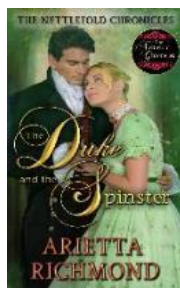
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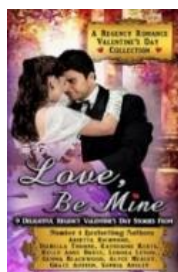
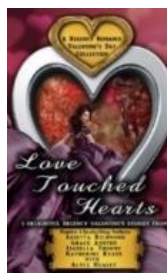
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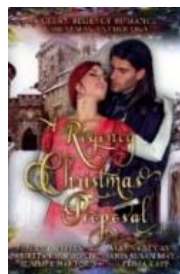
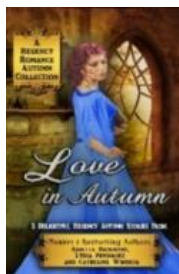


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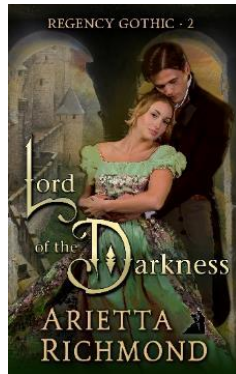


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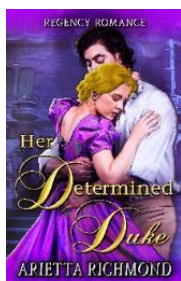
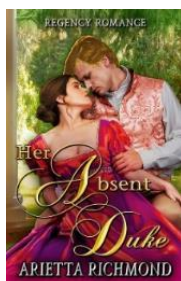




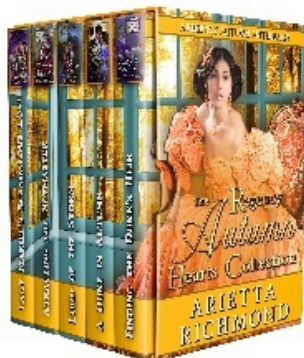
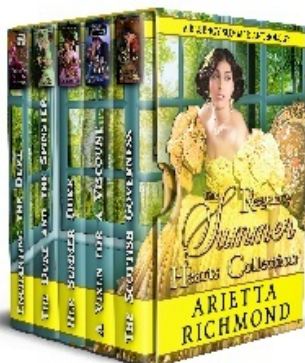
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